



Solo Leveling

VIII



Chugong



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- VIII -

CHUGONG



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Solo Leveling VIII

CHUGONG

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SOLO LEVELING Volume 8

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First published in Korea in 2017 by D&C MEDIA Co., Ltd.

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Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: July 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Won Young Seo, Payton Campbell Designed by Yen

Press Design: Wendy Chan Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Chugong, author. | Im, Hye Young, translator. | Torres, J., 1969– translator.

Title: Solo leveling / Chugong ; translation by Hye Young Im and J. Torres.

Other titles: Na honjaman rebereop. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2021.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020047938 | ISBN 9781975319274 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319298 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319311 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319335 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319359 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319377 (v. 6 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319397 (v. 7 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319410 (v. 8 ; trade paperback) Subjects: GSAFD: Fantasy fiction.

Classification: LCC PL994.215.G66 N313 2021 | DDC 895.73/5—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020047938>

ISBNs: 978-1-97531941-0 (paperback) 978-1-9753-1942-7 (ebook)

E3-20230623-JV-NF-ORI

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1
TAKING UP ARMS



1

TAKING UP ARMS

Is this what hell on earth would look like? The sky was filled with black clouds that loomed over the bloodstained land echoing with screams and covered in ash and filth.

The Monarchs, born in darkness and bred only for destruction, were erasing every trace of light across the land.

Their leader, the Dragon King, stood atop the city of ashes and scanned his surroundings.

Where did he run off to?

When the Shadow Monarch used his perception and revealed his presence, the Dragon King had assumed it was a declaration of war. His heart, which seemed to have turned to stone while wandering the gap between dimensions, began hammering in his chest again for the first time in ages.

Only a few opponents in existence could ever pose a threat to him, and now that one of them had bared their teeth, the real war was at hand. The madness of both sides of a war clashing was a veritable gift to the Monarch of Destruction. The joy it brought him was incomparable.

However, against his expectations, the Shadow Monarch concealed himself once more and hadn't returned despite one of the human countries being completely wiped out.

Of course, it would've been suicidal to attack with a little over 100,000 soldiers when the combined forces of the World of Chaos boasted an army of ten million. But the Shadow Monarch wouldn't have threatened the Dragon King—and risked revealing his location—if he'd been planning to run away from

the start.

.....What is he waiting for?

As time went on, the Dragon King's anxiety grew. Not knowing where or when the Shadow Monarch would attack, he had no choice but to move his army with caution, which naturally slowed his advance. It was quite aggravating, as he'd wanted to rid the battlefield of the human vermin and prepare to engage in battle with the Rulers.

By any chance...

...is he looking to have his kind annihilated in order to turn them into soldiers?

Regardless, the Shadow Monarch surely knew that recruiting humans who didn't know how to wield mana wouldn't be much help against the army of destruction.

At that moment, a voice interrupted his musings. "Humans are approaching, my lord."

One of his ancient dragon bodyguards informed him of an attack. The Dragon King was under the impression that all the humans in this country who could use mana, the so-called "hunters," had already been taken care of. The puzzled Monarch looked up to see countless missiles raining down.

Kra-kooooooooom!

It was a pitifully insignificant last-ditch effort from such pathetic creatures. The pesky humans refused to accept their fate even though they knew that their mana-less weapons wouldn't harm a hair on magic beasts.

.....How boring.

The Dragon King's eyebrow twitched as his anxiety turned into annoyance, then anger.

No one interfere.

After issuing a warning to his soldiers, the Dragon King revealed his true form for the first time since arriving on Earth.

The pilots who had risked their lives to delay the magic beasts for a moment

longer were petrified upon seeing the humongous threat filling the entire sky.

“Oh no.....”

Their shock didn't last very long. A breath of pure destruction shot out of his mouth and engulfed all the fighter planes.

Fwoooooom!

A single minute. The pilots gave their lives in vain for less than a minute of time.

Seemingly unsatisfied with their sacrifice, the Dragon King raised his head to the sky and let out a terrifying roar—a declaration of war to the Shadow Monarch.

GRAAAAAAAAAAH!

* * *

Jinwoo opened his eyes when he heard the Dragon King's roar.

.....It's time.

He'd been organizing his thoughts within the white castle Beru had built him. Darkness and silence had settled over the unnecessarily large room. He found that he didn't mind the solitude in the desolate space and felt guilty for previously scolding Beru about its construction.

He softly called out, “Thanks, Beru.”

Beru, who had been soundlessly waiting in Jinwoo's shadow, now poked out his head.

“My king—”

“I know.” Jinwoo cut Beru off.

Bellion rose next to Beru. “It is too dangerous, my lord.”

Igris followed after them like he'd been waiting for his chance to do so, kneeling and bowing his head. “I agree, my lord.”

Jinwoo gazed at the three marshals trying to dissuade him. Since shadow soldiers wouldn't die as long as their master was alive, their top priority was Jinwoo's safety. However, there were times one had to take the bull by the

horns despite knowing the risks—and for Jinwoo, the time had come.

“Ashborn, the previous Shadow Monarch..... He said he liked this side of me.”

Ashborn had been drawn to how Jinwoo had always been the type to face things head-on, no matter how reckless it would be.

“What would he have done in the same situation?”

“.....”

Bellion was lost for words as he recalled the previous Shadow Monarch.

When the other Fragments of Luminosity had rebelled against the Supreme Being in order to kill him, Ashborn alone stood against them. The previous Shadow Monarch was someone who fulfilled his duty regardless of the odds.

Bellion looked back up to see Jinwoo smiling.

I.....see the resemblance.

Bellion could picture Ashborn standing where Jinwoo stood now, so he lowered his head and pledged his loyalty to Jinwoo.

“I will be with you until the end, my lord.”

The other two seemed to agree, as they didn’t protest further.

“Took you long enough.” Jinwoo grinned.

Jinwoo fished his cell phone from his pocket. He was acutely aware that he didn’t have much time left, and this could be the last time he’d be able to reach his family.

.....

However, he couldn’t bring himself to press the call button. It was entirely possible that he’d get cold feet if he heard his loved ones’ voices.

Crack!

The pieces of his shattered phone fell out of his hand. He’d be satisfied with hearing their voices after the battle was won.

Having found his resolve once more, Jinwoo took his Kamish’s Wrath daggers from the pocket dimension inventory and gripped them in his hands. He then

tore the shirt he was wearing into long strips and wrapped them around each hand to secure his weapons. He wasn't worried that he'd lose his grip so much as going through the motions to ready himself for the fight.

Taking off his shirt revealed his firm upper-body muscles, which rippled with each breath he took.

Okay.

The thrill of the upcoming battle coursed through him, and his heartbeat started to pick up. He'd always enjoyed this feeling when he felt it racing through him before entering a dungeon. Both his body and mind were ready.

Whew.....

He gave a short exhale, and his eyes narrowed into a menacing glare as he quickly ran through the battle plan that he'd meticulously simulated in his mind many times. He couldn't afford any mistakes.

Seeing the fire burning in Jinwoo's eyes, his three marshals nodded in turn.

Jinwoo declared, "Let's do this."

* * *

In his office at the Hunter's Association of Korea, President Jinchul Woo remembered something his grandfather had taught him. Apparently, to grasp how bad a situation was, all one had to do was look closely at the news anchors' expressions. His grandfather, who had lived through the war and tragedies that had hit South Korea in the past, had sat young Jinchul on his lap and explained:

"If the anchor looks bright and happy, it's nothing. If it's a little dark, you should be a little cautious. You know there's real trouble when....."

As he examined the anchorwoman's face, Jinchul mumbled, "...When they're trying to stay calm."

News anchors would try to keep their cool in order to not send viewers into a panic when the situation was dire, so Jinchul's grandfather had always warned him to be on the lookout. And sure enough, the woman on TV reporting on the current state of the US was keeping her expression and voice very composed.

".....And when contact with the hunters was lost, the American government

quickly deployed the army in a bid for more time to evacuate people.....”

Jinchul squeezed his eyes shut, unable to watch the disaster unfolding on the other side of Earth. He was already aware of the scale of the threat thanks to Jinwoo’s memories, and he was certain this was an unstoppable calamity. If even the US, with the strongest hunters and military in the world, was being devastated by those creatures, all that humankind could do now was pray.

But what kind of miracle would it take to stop them? Jinchul shook his head to rid himself of the thought that there could be creatures even more terrifying out there.

A miracle, huh?

Speaking of which.....

Jinchul hadn’t been able to contact Jinwoo for the past three days. He had witnessed Jinwoo’s ability to create dozens of gates during the gathering of global representatives. Jinwoo could escape to a different world if he wanted to. Heck, he might have escaped already.

And if he did, who could blame him? His two options were to single-handedly fight ten million soldiers bred for destruction or run away to where they couldn’t reach him. If Jinchul had had a choice, he wasn’t sure if he would choose the first option.

There was nothing left to do but pray.

“Please, I beg you.....” Jinchul turned his eyes up, as if the ceiling would give him an answer. “.....Do not abandon us.”

At that moment—

“.....”

Stunned, Jinchul was transfixed by the TV monitor, eyes widening at the sight.

* * *

“Ahhhh!”

The powerful, undefeated US Air Force fared no better than their Canadian counterparts against the army of destruction.

Blam!

One of the pilots scrambled to eject himself from his fighter plane as the engine was crushed. He let out a ghastly wail as he plummeted down, forced to witness his fellow pilots being instantly annihilated.

“Nooooo!”

Boom! Ka-boom! Boom!

The roar and flashes of explosions filled the air. Amid the chaos, the pilot called out his dying colleagues’ names. He was rapidly approaching the earth, but he managed to deploy his parachute in time. He tumbled a few times when he hit the ground. Dizzy, he threw up the entire contents of his stomach.

Blaaargh!

He had tears in his eyes. Whether it was because of the physical pain or because he resented his helplessness was unclear.

Whatever the case, he didn’t have much time left. The smells of gunpowder and blood stung his nose as a wave of magic beasts sensed his presence and charged. He hurriedly cut off the straps of his parachute and pulled a gun from the holster on his hip.

“Die, you bastards! Die!”

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

His ears rang with the sound of the shots, but they did nothing to slow the beasts.

Click, click, click.

The pilot was struck with regret as soon as he ran out of bullets. He should’ve saved one bullet for himself. His hands dropped limply at his sides.

The first creature to reach the devastated human resembled a cockroach.

Sh-sh-sh-shk!

The pilot’s legs buckled as the cockroach-like beast loomed over him, and he moaned in despair.

“Dammit……!”

Shrrriiiiiip!

The bug magic beasts were torn apart, like some humongous invisible beast had raked them with its claws.

“Whoa!”

The sobbing pilot searched for the source of this miracle, and his eyes soon landed on an Asian man. The hunter’s back was to the pilot, but the daggers he held were easily recognizable.

“H-Hunter Sung? You’re Jinwoo Sung, right?”

Jinwoo looked over his shoulder at the pilot. Jinwoo’s expression was so frightening that it was hard to tell if he was friend or foe, but his eyes were clearly telling the pilot to run away. And for good reason, as even more enemies were heading toward them.

The pilot urged, “Hunter Sung, even for you, doing this alone is—”

Shhk, shhk, shhk!

Kamish’s Wrath easily sliced through the magic beasts like they were merely paper dolls. Before the next group of beasts reached them, Jinwoo turned back to the pilot.

“Go!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

The pilot finally managed to scramble back up on his feet and ran away as fast as he could. Jinwoo watched him leave before facing forward.

Despite having cut down dozens of enemies with only two attacks, that was just the tip of the iceberg. Hundreds of magic beasts had smelled a fight and were drawing closer. Dealing with these bugs would be the first step of winning this war.

Whew.....

As the soldiers of the World of Chaos charged at Jinwoo, he took a deep breath and uttered the word that would turn the tide.

“Arise.”

2

THE TRAP



2

THE TRAP

Kreeeee!

As soon as Jinwoo issued the command, the bugs he had felled a few minutes ago rose to join his shadow army.

Jinwoo had revived magic beasts as his soldiers plenty of times in the past, but these new shadow soldiers were on a whole other level. Previously, the shadow versions used to be weaker than when they had been alive due to the system suppressing parts of the Shadow Monarch's power. Now that Jinwoo had taken on the mantle of the Shadow Monarch, his soldiers were able to reach their full potential.

Kreeee!

Black steam exuded like flames from the new shadow soldiers, who were stronger than ever before. Naturally, the more powerful the denizens of Chaos were, the more powerful Jinwoo's extracted army would be. The very strength of the Army of Destruction that allowed it to wreak such havoc would now be its downfall.

Jinwoo gave the animated new recruits their first command.

Go get 'em!

Skraaaaaah!

The bug-type shadow soldiers charged at the denizens of Chaos. Jinwoo followed soon after, quickly overtaking them and jumping straight into the nearest pack of beasts.

Groar!

The group of flustered orcs and ogres randomly swung their weapons to no avail as Jinwoo effortlessly avoided them and responded with an attack of his own. The magic beasts were blown away as if a storm was sweeping through their midst. Every time Jinwoo wielded his daggers, the black aura stretching out from the blades crushed not only the orcs but the ground they stood on. The orcs and ogres were slaughtered before they could even scream.

At that very moment, the sky above Jinwoo grew dark.

Grrrr.....

There stood a giant so tall, Jinwoo's neck hurt as he looked up at it. It held a heavy stone pillar almost the length of his own arm, and its mouth was smudged with the blood of the countless humans it had devoured.

Jinwoo wrinkled his brow and made his move before the giant could take a swing. Holding his daggers in his preferred reverse grip, he came to a stop between the giant's legs in a blink and slashed a dagger with all his might.

Shhhhk!

The black aura delivered a clean slice at the giant's thick ankle.

Gaaaaah!

The giant cried out in pain, wobbling until he eventually lost his balance. His humongous body tilted backward and crashed to the ground.

Whud!

Countless magic beasts behind the giant were unable to move out of the way in time and were crushed by its weight. Next, the bug-type shadow soldiers swarmed onto the fallen giant. It struggled to swat them away, but they soon reached its face and began to feast.

Ahhhhhh!

The giant's spasms quickly ended, but death wasn't the end of the road for it as the Shadow Monarch gave his order once again.

"Arise."

Grrrr.....

Due to the bugs' handiwork, the shadow that slowly rose from next to the giant's body was faceless. Additional shadow soldiers crawled their way out from under the giant's corpse. These soldiers made from the corpses of dead orcs already gripped weapons in their hands as they glared at their former colleagues.

The shadow army already had more than a hundred additional recruits.

Thud!

The denizens of Chaos flinched as the giant shadow soldier moved, but it ignored them. Instead, it bent over to pry the stone pillar from its corpse, reclaiming its weapon.

Plop, plop.

Clumps of mud fell from the stone pillar onto the ground. As if regretting not having had the opportunity to use this weapon before it died, the giant swung the weapon back as far as it could.

The magic beasts, who had been relishing the war, finally realized just who they were dealing with and started to flee in terror. Jinwoo could sense their trepidation and spoke to them in the language of the Monarchs.

"What are you afraid of?"

After all, his counterattack had only just begun. It was way too early for the enemy to feel this agitated. He leveled a spine-chilling glare at them.

Hwooosh!

The giant shadow soldier swung its stone pillar at the ground, bowling the magic beasts over like tiny toy figures.

Krrrunk!

* * *

As soon as Jinwoo appeared on the battlefield, the vigilant Dragon King zeroed in on his location.

The eastern front.

The army of destruction had spread out in all directions with the Dragon King

in the epicenter, and the Shadow Monarch made his presence known at the eastern end.

The ancient dragons and another Monarch detected the Shadow Monarch's movements a beat later. The King of Evil Specters, the Transfiguration Monarch, addressed him.

"We should have all our armies—"

The Dragon King raised his hand to cut him off, puzzling his subordinates. The Monarch of Destruction had been waiting with bated breath for the Shadow Monarch, so why did he hesitate even as the Shadow Monarch openly declared war? More and more soldiers were being transformed into the Shadow Monarch's soldiers every second.

The anxious Transfiguration Monarch, who had taken over the body of a short middle-aged human male, opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by the Dragon King.

"The shadow army..... Where is the army of the dead?"

Despite the distance, the lack of soldiers hidden in Jinwoo's shadow did not escape his notice.

Why would he.....?

The Transfiguration Monarch quickly closed his eyes. Soon, a mirage of an eye appeared in midair where the Shadow Monarch had begun his fight. The magic eye scanned everything in the area.

.....!

The Dragon King was correct. The Shadow Monarch stood in the middle of a blood-drenched battlefield, but his army was nowhere to be found both in and out of his shadow.

The Transfiguration Monarch opened his eyes to see the angry yet curious Dragon King.

What is he up to.....?

What was the Shadow Monarch thinking by entering the battlefield without his army to protect him? This might be their best chance to get rid of him, but

the Dragon King couldn't blindly move his army without figuring out the Shadow Monarch's intentions. An all-out attack might be exactly what the enemy wanted.

The uneasiness, as if his vision was hindered by fog, forced him to stay his hand.

One of the ancient dragons worriedly spoke. "My lord—"

Alas, a glare was all it took to compel the ancient dragons to lower their heads.

The Dragon King looked toward where Jinwoo was rampaging. The armies of Chaos were rapidly decreasing while the army of the dead increased.

He would have to make a call, and soon, but with the war taking an unexpected turn and the Shadow Monarch's unpredictability, he couldn't just yet.

The Dragon King grimaced.

Whatever are you up to, Shadow Monarch.....?

* * *

At some point, there were so many enemies that Jinwoo went on autopilot as he mowed them down. Despite the speed at which his army was growing, it seemed to be nothing compared to the sheer number of magic beasts.

Whew.....

Jinwoo took a deep breath and allowed his perception to take over his body. He was a killing machine, his body relentlessly repeating superhuman maneuvers on instinct. Hundreds of creatures were ripped apart within the blink of an eye.

"Arise!"

And those hundreds became new shadow soldiers. The battlefield was coated in black shadows like a huge tsunami swallowing the world. Each time Jinwoo moved, the sea of black grew.

"Yaaaaaah!"

Jinwoo let out a thunderous mana-filled roar, launching those in front of him. The creatures' ears bled as their eardrums ruptured, and they groaned in pain. Shadow soldiers swarmed around them before they could get a hold of themselves, and their death cries rang out over the battlefield.

This had been going on for a while when Jinwoo detected a completely different type of magic beast was approaching. Above him, hundreds of flying wyverns and the humanoid dragonfolk riding them blotted out the sky.

Is this the army of destruction making its move?

Jinwoo was unable to detect the presence of the Dragon King himself, but there was no need to be disappointed. He still had plenty of time. All Jinwoo needed to do was to give him a reason to join the fight.

Kraaaah!

At the head dragonfolk's signal, the wyverns shot straight toward Jinwoo.

Energy instantly gathered inside Jinwoo. Here was an opportunity to force the Dragon King to join the fray. He would oppress the Dragon King's own subjects with a strength they could not withstand.

Jinwoo stretched his hands out at the dragons speeding toward him.

Ruler's Authority.

He concentrated this power in both hands as if he was trying to compress the sky and pulled something invisible down. The mana in the atmosphere responded to the Shadow Monarch's will, and the entire swarm of hundreds of wyverns and dragonfolk was slammed to the ground by unseen hands.

Krrrrunch!

It was a spectacular scene. The land shook from impact. The force was so great that Jinwoo also couldn't hide his astonishment at the Shadow Monarch's unbridled power.

However, there was no time to be surprised, as Jinwoo spotted a dragon that had been hidden behind the pack of wyverns. There was a glow coming from its mouth.

.....!

The dragon unleashed a terrifying plume of fire.

Kwaaaaaaah!

The dragon increased its altitude after its strike. It could no longer sense the enemy's presence. Had it melted the enemy to nothing? The dragon hovered at a safe altitude and scanned the area for the Shadow Monarch. When the flames died down and the smoke cleared, the Shadow Monarch was nowhere to be found.

Where is he.....?

Just then, the dragon sensed a presence above it. By the time a chill ran down its spine, it was too late.

Hyah!

Jinwoo landed on the dragon's head and stabbed it with Kamish's Wrath.

Crack!

The dagger's aura penetrated the dragon's head down to its chin. The lifeless dragon plunged toward the earth.

Whud!

Jinwoo leaped down from the dragon's limp head. Without so much as looking back, he spoke his command as he advanced toward other magic beasts.

"Arise."

Behind him, the dragon and hundreds of dragonfolk and wyverns rose as shadows.

* * *

The Dragon King's army of destruction was leagues above the disorderly rabble of the other Monarchs' armies, so he was able to sense that some of his soldiers had been recruited to the shadow army. He could no longer stand back and simply watch out of caution. He could not allow his soldiers to be devoured by the army of the dead.

"We shall strike," the Dragon King declared to the ancient dragons. *"Follow*

me.”

Just in case, he gave a different order to the Transfiguration Monarch.

“Stay here and prepare for any sudden attacks from the shadow army.”

“As you wish.”

Hundreds of gates connecting to the battlefield on the eastern front appeared before the Dragon King and his bodyguards. He’d be sure to catch the King of the Dead in his grasp. Anger burned in his eyes as he and the ancient dragons stepped through the gates. The army of destruction, which had held out against the Shadow Monarch’s provocations until now, was finally on the move.

* * *

Unlike the collision of superpowers on the eastern front, the one-sided battle on the western front was coming to an end. The US Army, the last stronghold against the soldiers of the World of Chaos, was being torn to shreds by the fangs and claws of the magic beasts. They had attempted to wield hunters’ weapons, but as average, unawakened citizens, they were unable to properly use weapons that had been initially created for raid purposes. In the end, the magic beasts made short work of them.

“Argh! Ahhh!”

The agile and keen bug-type magic beasts led the vanguard on the western front as well.

Shhhp! Shhhp!

They quickly advanced.

Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-bang!

The bugs ignored the bullets as they pushed toward the humans and began to tear them apart.

“Gaaaah!”

Those who survived fell back and continued their ineffective shooting sprees, but what choice did they have? Trying to face them with swords was simply unimaginable. The humans were at a loss as to what to do.

Kiiiiik!

Finished with their first meal, the insects turned toward their next prey. There was nowhere to run. The grim platoon leader looked at his subordinates, who nodded back. They had been prepared for this moment ever since they were told to mobilize to buy some time for the evacuating civilians.

The platoon leader took out a hand grenade and pulled the safety pin. Sensing something strange was happening, the bugs screeched and rushed at the platoon leader in a frightening frenzy.

Kiiiiik! Kiiiiik!

The platoon leader looked like a deer caught in headlights as the bugs charged at him. They reached him in a split second and opened their jaws wide, but before they could take a bite, someone jumped in front of the platoon leader, snatching the grenade from his hand as they blocked the bugs with their wide back.

The platoon leader looked up in a daze at a man who was two heads taller than he was.

“T-Thomas Andre?”

Thomas winked at him and spun around to stuff the grenade into the mouth of the nearest bug. It wouldn't cause any real damage to the creature, but it would at least be surprised by the foreign object in its stomach. With a smirk, Thomas swung a large fist at the bug's head.

Pow!

Its headless body hit the ground quite a distance away.

“Ah, well, I guess I didn't give it time to be surprised.” Thomas shrugged.

Behind him, the best of the best hunters dashed forward and joined the fray.

Kiiik!

Kiiiiik!

As the pained screeches of the bug-type magic beasts spread through the battlefield, the surviving American soldiers burst into smiles as they realized just

who had come to their rescue.

“S-Scavenger!”

“It’s the Scavenger Guild!”

“Oh, thank God!”

The Scavenger Guild quickly and efficiently dealt with the situation as one would expect from the world’s top hunters. But there was no time to relax with yet more magic beasts headed their way.

Thomas scanned the horde. Orcs, ogres, trolls, minotaurs, cyclopes, and more, all creatures Thomas had easily dealt with in dungeons. Even considering their numbers, this was a piece of cake for him.

The only problem is.....

There was one incredibly powerful magic beast among the trash. And just as the trash didn’t dare make a move because of Thomas, he restrained himself because of it.

The strong magic beast observed the situation for a while before slowly walking forward.

“Ah, you’re that weak vessel who was almost killed by the Fang Monarch.”

The King of Monstrous Humanoids flashed a sinister grin. While the Fang Monarch lorded over beasts and specialized in hunting, the King of Monstrous Humanoids ruled over humanlike monsters, such as orcs and ogres, and specialized in close-quarter combat. To him, the sight of the puny human waving his tiny muscles around was laughable at best. The Iron Body Monarch released his mana to get the drop on the human, confident that he could end Thomas with a snap of his fingers.

“.....?”

Unlike the quivering hunters behind him, Thomas still seemed fairly relaxed. What could the human possibly have up his sleeve?

“.....This should do it, right?”

Thomas appeared to be talking to himself when an inky darkness leached out

from under his feet and quickly spread over the ground. The Monarch's eye twitched.

Shadows.....?

That was a skill the Shadow Monarch possessed, but there was no way the Iron Body Monarch wouldn't have sensed such power in the vicinity.

It was then that a familiar voice came from behind Thomas.

"It has been a long while, King of Monstrous Humanoids."

Grand Marshal Bellion's polite words did nothing to mask the biting tone. Behind him, the 130,000-strong shadow army rose from where they were biding their time in Thomas's shadow.



3

LURE



3

LURE

The 130,000 elite shadow soldiers revived by the Shadow Monarch had hidden inside the human's shadow, obscuring their presence as much as possible.

It was a trap. Face-to-face with the shadow army, the Iron Body Monarch felt disoriented, as if he had been plunged into an abyss.

I've been had.

The army he was leading on the western front wasn't good enough to go against the shadow army, and with Bellion and Igris leading it, the Iron Body Monarch himself was in peril. This was probably what the Shadow Monarch had been aiming for.

.....I must let the others know.

He urgently tried to contact the Dragon King but found some kind of external force interfering with his communication.

Could it be.....?

Was this the Shadow Monarch's doing as well? The Monarch quickly scanned the army to locate the source of the interference and discovered a high orc shaman standing next to Igris, clutching some type of talisman while chanting.

.....!

Fang, now a general rank soldier after being reborn as a true shadow soldier, was blocking the Monarch's telepathy, aided by the Sphere of Avarice.

Fang's cheeks flushed in embarrassment when he made eye contact with the king he used to serve, but he couldn't stop a smirk as he continued his

incantation. The seemingly mocking grin enraged the King of Monstrous Humanoids.

“How dare you.....!”

This was not how the Shadow Monarch operated, let alone his army. The shadow army had always stoutly confronted their enemies and announced their impending doom. All this sneaking around—

It's because of the human.

The current Shadow Monarch was tainting the war with his humanity. Where was his pride as a Monarch?! The furious Iron Body Monarch enlarged his muscles until they seemed close to exploding, veins bulging out.

He howled, “He is not worthy of being a Monarch!”

He appeared in a flash in front of Fang, but Beru blocked his path.

Bam!

Beru locked hands with the Monarch, each straining to overtake the other. The ant king glared at the King of Monstrous Humanoids and hissed.

“Take...back...those words. You shall not get away with insulting my liege!”

However, the Iron Body Monarch applied enough pressure to twist Beru's arms as he bellowed, “How dare a mere soldier get in a Monarch's way!”

Skraaaaaah!

Beru let out an ear-piercing screech as his body doubled in size.

* * *

The Dragon King had watched the soldiers of the World of Chaos being decimated due to his hesitation, as well as the growing numbers of the shadow army. So when he stepped out of the gate, his eyes were ablaze with fury. They locked straight onto Jinwoo, the very center of the storm swallowing up the armies of Chaos.

The Dragon King was out for Jinwoo's blood. He didn't bother changing out of his human form as he spewed his Breath of Destruction.

Fwaaaaah!

Jinwoo, who had been busy dealing with the magic beasts, caught sight of the bright flash just in time.

It's him!

Jinwoo leaped out of the way, leaving behind the soldiers of both armies to be engulfed by the Dragon King's breath and disintegrate into nothing.

Fwaaaaaaaaah!

Jinwoo landed nearby. The Dragon King stopped his attack and regarded the human as numerous gates spawned behind him, from which various dragons and dragonfolk emerged. They made up the main unit of the army led by the Dragon King, the Monarch of Destruction. Their forces, which could destroy the whole world in just a day, had assembled in its entirety to take down the Shadow Monarch.

.....

Jinwoo swallowed hard as he sensed the immense and limitless power emanating from the Dragon King. At his command, the shadow soldiers abruptly fell back, standing behind Jinwoo to mirror the army of destruction.

The Dragon King sneered. "Is this your entire army?"

Jinwoo had managed to hurriedly recruit about a few thousand soldiers for his shadow army. On the other hand, there were almost a million foot soldiers, hundreds of dragons, and the Dragon King himself on the opposing side.

Naturally, Jinwoo was also acutely aware of the difference between the two armies, which was why he'd chosen this tactic.

"Charge!"

Jinwoo let his army loose once more. The Dragon King was in disbelief.

Is he still insisting on going head-to-head, despite the size of my army?

The human was clearly out of his mind! Yet there the shadow soldiers were, colliding with the army of destruction.

The dragons blew powerful flames toward them.

Fwooosh!

Strangely, the shadow soldiers struck by the fire disappeared like dust instead of regenerating. The Dragon King realized immediately that they were meant only to buy some time.

Where is.....?

He expanded his perception and located the Shadow Monarch running away somewhere using his own shadow. The Dragon King chuckled at the pathetic attempt. Jinwoo was presumably trying to utilize a hit-and-run strategy to hack away at the soldiers of the World of Chaos, but that plan had a huge flaw: There was nothing stopping the Dragon King from chasing after him.

He tracked the connection of Jinwoo's shadow to the battlefield in the west.

Over there!

Jinwoo would never be able to escape his clutches. The Dragon King jumped through a gate that would take him to the western front.

.....

On the other side, 130,000 shadow soldiers awaited him. But that wasn't all. Jinwoo himself had been lying in wait.

".....Arise."

The army of Chaos that had been annihilated by the real shadow army before Jinwoo's arrival rose to join their ranks. The Dragon King observed the shadow soldiers now numbering close to 200,000.

"Is this what you were aiming for?"

Jinwoo had lured him to this particular battlefield in a bid for the outnumbered shadow army to gain the upper hand.

The Dragon King scoffed. "How pathetic."

He finally understood the Shadow Monarch's intentions. Though it had cost them the western front, it was a small price to pay for Jinwoo's head.

I would gladly give up half my army if it meant toppling him.

Fear was born of uncertainty, but the Shadow Monarch's plans had now been brought to light.

“My fellow Monarch.” The Dragon King’s lips curled into a smile. “You probably thought that I alone would chase after you, but alas.....”

Jinwoo couldn’t be more wrong.

The most powerful mage among the Monarchs stood on the Dragon King’s side. The Transfiguration Monarch, who had been waiting for this very moment, generated innumerable gates to connect the opposite ends of the battlefield, allowing countless soldiers of the World of Chaos to join the fight against the shadow army.

Checkmate. Jinwoo’s plan was completely dashed, and his misstep would lead to his demise.

The smug Dragon King taunted him. “You’ve lost.”

However, for a brief moment, Jinwoo seemed to return the smile.

Got you.

Everything had gone just as the Shadow Monarch had anticipated.

The Dragon King caught the change in expression.

.....You laugh?

In the next instant, the shadow soldiers sank into their commander’s shadow as he recalled them. What in the world was going through his head? Doing so was practically suicide at this point. He wouldn’t be able to run, either, without his soldiers to buy him time. Even if he didn’t want to lose soldiers, leaving his back wide open was surely a foolhardy move!

Before Jinwoo could do anything else, the Dragon King and the army of Chaos advanced. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers flooded through the gates and rushed straight for the Shadow Monarch.

Just as the Dragon King closed in on him and stretched out an arm, Jinwoo’s pupils transformed into those of a dragon. The Dragon King finally realized that something was very, very wrong.

“You.....!”

Time seemed to slow for a second.

.....

A mighty roar that made any being weaker than him fall into crippling despair burst out from the depths of Jinwoo's soul.

“Roaaaaaar!”

It was Dragon's Fear, the skill Jinwoo had acquired from Kamish's rune stone and one of the most lethal abilities dragons could use. Initially, Jinwoo couldn't be bothered with it, since the skill didn't discriminate between friend or foe.

But the circumstances have changed!

The skill that was used by Kamish to cast hundreds of the best hunters into hell was now being used on the dragons themselves.

“Ahhhhh!”

Since Dragon's Fear was boosted by the Shadow Monarch's endless mana, the Dragon King was the only one immune to the skill. After immobilizing his other foes, Jinwoo grabbed the Dragon King's arm.

“You impudent.....!” The Dragon King scowled.

Jinwoo grinned and tightened his grip. “You're coming with me.”



4

GO FOR BROKE



4

GO FOR BROKE

A circular shadow expanded from under Jinwoo's feet to include the Dragon King. The Monarch of Destruction was taken aback.

Was this his plan the whole time.....?

Appearing alone on the eastern front, dispatching the shadow army to clean up the western front, luring the Dragon King here—it was all for this? The Dragon King had to give it up for the enemy's clever strategy. The Shadow Monarch had put the Dragon King in a position where he had no other choice but to make a move, and by making him drop his guard by using an obvious trick, he'd manipulated the other Monarch to show up exactly where he wanted him.

.....On top of that, he uses Dragon's Fear?

The Dragon King had been one-upped. Seeing the sour look on the Dragon King's face, Jinwoo clamped down harder on his arm.

Success.

Every move Jinwoo made had been calculated. All that was left was to move forward a few steps.....

The circular shadow swallowed up both Jinwoo and the Dragon King, briefly engulfing them in darkness before depositing them at the designated exit. Having successfully escorted the Dragon King to the actual battlefield, Jinwoo quickly put some distance between them.

Having been separated from his soldiers, the Dragon King curiously surveyed their new surroundings.

“Where are we.....?”

“The opposite end of the earth.”

It wasn't precisely the opposite end, but they had crossed an ocean, so they were a considerable distance away. They were in Japan, where the land had soaked up an incredible amount of mana following the death of the King of Giants. Since the area and its atmosphere had been fortified with mana, it would likely withstand the impact of a battle with the Monarch of Destruction.

Thanks to the efforts of the shadow soldiers, the sea of trees had been razed to create a field that stretched as far as the eye could see. This made the huge white castle on the hill with its black flag waving in the wind stand out.

The Dragon King gestured to it. “Is that your castle?”

“.....That's right.”

“Such a squalid structure for the Shadow Monarch.”

Jinwoo felt a twinge of pity for Beru for a second, but he didn't bother responding. Whether it be bravado or a bluff, the Dragon King seemed way too relaxed for Jinwoo's liking.

“Well, it's about the right size for your mausoleum.”

Finally, the Dragon King locked eyes with Jinwoo.

.....

The Monarch of Destruction studied him before closing his eyes and attempting to communicate telepathically with his subordinates, but as expected, he was unable to reach them. Someone was borrowing the Shadow Monarch's power to cast a spell that blocked any communication.

The Shadow Monarch had clearly planned to isolate him from the start. He reopened his eyes to see the entire shadow army closing in on him. The tables had turned, and he was now the one facing an army of tens of thousands all by his lonesome.

The Dragon King was completely surrounded.

“Ahhh..... So this is a battle to see whether or not I can last until my soldiers

find me.”

But the Dragon King’s expression didn’t change. Although he enjoyed annihilating his enemies with his overwhelming army, it also amused him to be on the other end. After all, the Dragon King was an entity born for war. He was the avatar of destruction, and if it led to a war with blood, screams, madness, and ruin, he didn’t mind getting swept up in it.

The Dragon King laughed. “Allow me.”

With that, the smile dropped from his face. Jinwoo’s senses screamed at him, warning him that something was coming. Chills ran down his spine, and goose bumps appeared all over his body at once.

The Dragon King let out a bloodcurdling roar.

RAAAAAAH!

It was the Dragon King’s version of Dragon’s Fear, which sent a powerful shock wave rolling over the shadow army.

AAAAAH!

It shook both the ground and the very space around them. Sensing the sheer terror, pain, and confusion of his soldiers, Jinwoo quickly called them back.

AHHHHH!

Feeling dizzy, Jinwoo felt his knees buckle. The Dragon King smirked as the blood drained from Jinwoo’s face.

“This is the real thing.”

Jinwoo shook his head hard to recover from the shock of how the ultimate Dragon’s Fear felt as the other Monarch mildly explained.

“I could’ve easily freed myself, yet I was amazed by how you managed to corner me.”

Jinwoo squinted at the unexpected compliment, but the Dragon King wasn’t being sarcastic in the least.

“As such, I wanted to have a quiet discussion with you, Monarch to Monarch.”

Jinwoo managed to regain his breath and straightened up.

The Dragon King continued on. “Since you possess the Shadow Monarch’s memories, I’m sure you’re aware..... Our real enemies are not on this land but rather lie beyond that sky.”

He was referring to the Rulers. Their one and only mission in this world was to annihilate the Monarchs, those who had been born of darkness. Naturally, the Shadow Monarch would not be an exception.

“I had planned to prepare to face the Rulers after getting rid of you, but I changed my mind after witnessing how you fight. You hold different talents from Ashborn, and with you on our side, I see a glorious victory ahead.”

The Dragon King extended his hand.

“If you take my hand, I will do as you wish.”

Jinwoo glanced down at the proffered hand.

“If you want your family to live, I will allow it. If you want to save your country, then I shall. If you want me to leave this planet, so be it.”

Jinwoo slowly glanced back up at the Dragon King’s face. He looked to be the picture of benevolence.

“You shall be the owner of this land. You should rule this whole planet rather than a tiny castle on the hill. You are worthy of such power, and all you have to do is take my hand.”

The Dragon King gave an amiable grin.

If Jinwoo lent his strength to defeat the Rulers, then he, his family, his country, and everyone on this planet would see peace and freedom. That was the Dragon King’s promise.

“What say you, Shadow Monarch?”

The offer seemed to please Jinwoo, as the human smiled lightly. The Dragon King’s smile widened in turn.

“Will you join me?”

Jinwoo clearly enunciated. “Yeah, right.”

The Dragon King’s expression hardened as Jinwoo snapped at him. “You want

me to trust you while you're clearly itching to kill me?"

"Ha-ha..... Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

The Dragon King doubled over in laughter. Even his laughs contained mana, and Jinwoo had to steady himself with each thunderous chuckle.

When the Dragon King straightened up, his eyes had become cold and reptilian.

"I suppose I couldn't hide it from you."

Diplomacy had failed. If the Dragon King couldn't deceive Jinwoo, then all that was left was to crush the human. The Dragon King revealed his true form, letting his hostility flow unchecked.

"Bet everything you have and fight me, O great shadow!"

Jinwoo's eyes widened as a suffocating heat swept toward him. He hastily scrambled out of the way and watched what looked like a flaming mountain appear in front of him.

The true visage of the Dragon King was like if someone made a dragon out of molten lava. It reminded Jinwoo of the floors of the Demon's Castle that were continuously on fire. In fact, this truly felt like a fight between a human and a living castle. The image alone would be enough to put fear into anyone, but Jinwoo calmly tightened his hold on the Kamish's Wrath daggers.

Stomp!

Everything shook as the Dragon King stamped his left foot.

Look out!

Jinwoo swiftly avoided getting stepped on and summoned Kaisel.

Kreeee!

The wyvern burst from his shadow at the ready and flew straight up as Jinwoo jumped on his back. Jinwoo redirected the speeding wyvern toward the Dragon King.

The Dragon King already had his Breath of Destruction locked and loaded.

"Dive!"

As the blinding light shot out of the Dragon King's mouth, Kaisel abruptly flew downward, evading the obliterating flames. The frightening white fire passed right above Jinwoo's head.

Kaboom!

Following his master's command, Kaisel approached the Dragon King, expertly maneuvering around the barrage.

Hwooooo.....

When the flames abated, Kaisel got right in front of the Dragon King's forehead. Jinwoo gathered the mana around him.

Good job, Kaisel.

Mana was flowed into Kamish's Wrath in Jinwoo's right hand, collecting black energy for the final strike. Jinwoo swung the dagger with all his might at the Dragon King.

Whiiiiish!

The black aura, capable of making mincemeat out of anything, split off into several tendrils and struck the Dragon King on the head.

Shk, shk, shk, shk, shk!

However.....

What?!

Jinwoo stared, incredulous, as the aura failed to leave a single scratch on the Dragon King's fortified scales. Unscathed, the Monarch of Destruction looked up at Jinwoo.

The hunter grimaced.

More fire breath?

Instead, an ear-piercing screech resonated through the air.

Grahhhhhh!

Dragon's Fear! Although Jinwoo was able to withstand it this time around, Kaisel came to a stop. Before Jinwoo could recall the wyvern, he was hit by the

Dragon King's flames.

Fwooooosh!

Even as Kaisel fell from the direct hit, he twisted his body to shield his master from the incoming fire and dropped Jinwoo away from the danger.

"Nooo!" Jinwoo desperately screamed as he watched Kaisel turn to ash, disappearing without a trace.

Argh!

Jinwoo bit his lower lip and used a blast of mana to launch himself toward the Dragon King's chest. He latched on to a scale to keep from falling, but the heat of it burned his palm.

"Gah!"

Jinwoo gritted his teeth and raised Kamish's Wrath above his head with his other hand, its black aura pulsing.

Crack!

The dagger penetrated the dragon's scales, but that was the extent of the damage.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

No matter how hard Jinwoo swung, he was only able to scratch its skin. He turned his head when he felt hair raising on the back of his neck.

.....!

The Dragon King's arm was right at Jinwoo. The hunter let himself fall to the ground, cushioning his landing with mana. A Breath of Destruction mercilessly followed him.

Kwahhhhhh!

Jinwoo tried to catch his breath after yet another narrow escape.

"Huff, huff, huff....."

Despite Jinwoo's multiple attacks, the Dragon King was an immovable mountain. He was incomparably stronger than even giants, both defensively

and offensively. Jinwoo needed a different strategy.

I need something stronger.....

He needed more power, something strong enough to knock down a giant protected by iron armor with their bare hands. Just as a diminutive insect could do little against a human, if Jinwoo wanted to take down a mountain, he would have to become one himself.

Wait a minute—iron armor?

An idea struck him like a bolt of lightning. If he could create armor using the power of darkness, shouldn't he be able to manipulate the shape of it? Following this train of thought, a shadow spread out from under Jinwoo's feet.

".....?" The Dragon King sensed the movement as well.

Black essence oozed out of the shadow wrapped around the Shadow Monarch's body in layers, rapidly expanding his size.

What kind of trick is he trying to pull now?

Though the Dragon King was overcome with curiosity, his instincts told him to strike quickly. However, before he could use Breath of Destruction, he felt a tap from behind.

.....?

The Monarch turned around to find Fang hiding in a corner and shooting pillars of fire at his back. When he met the Monarch's glare, the trembling shadow soldier dropped the Sphere of Avarice.

Clack.....

"You dare.....?"

The Dragon King changed his target, but before he could do anything, something smacked him across the head.

Bash!

As the Dragon King was thrown sideways from the impact, he spotted a gigantic shadowy figure that practically touched the sky. Tens of thousands of black lightning bolts struck its shoulders, as if the world was rejecting its very

existence.

.....An astral body?

That was impossible. Because the Shadow Monarch was originally a Fragment of Luminosity, he had no hidden form. So how could the Shadow Monarch take a humongous form?

Craaaaaack!

The Dragon King tensed his legs and skidded to a dead stop, peeling off a thin layer of the ground like one would a piece of fruit.

Could he be.....?

The Dragon King froze as a certain theory took root in his mind.

Is he somehow.....able to access the power of death?

But how? Jinwoo used to be an ordinary human until not too long ago, so how was he able to control the power of death in this manner?

“I see,” the Dragon King murmured, impressed. “You have spent much time straddling the line between life and death.”

So this was the reason Ashborn could transfer the entirety of his power to this mere human. This human had been fighting for his life long before he even met Ashborn, and he’d continued to do so. The Dragon King had a newfound respect for the new Shadow Monarch.

“.....”

He now regretted trying to exploit Jinwoo’s weak human nature in the battle against the Rulers.

Whatever I do.....I must kill him. He is far too dangerous.

The two stared each other down.

The enlarged Shadow Monarch glanced at his own hand.

Is this.....? Is this really me?

He tried wiggling his fingers. Jinwoo was commanding a body that had become darkness incarnate. But his body wasn’t the only thing that had

expanded. He was now an endless source of power, the limits of which Jinwoo couldn't even hazard a guess. Jinwoo had successfully become a mountain in order to bring down another mountain.

Jinwoo looked up in time to see destruction rushing straight for him.

Kra-koom!

The collision sent balls of fire and black lightning everywhere, but Jinwoo was able to dig his heels in and stop the Dragon King's charge. Jinwoo's physical strength was on par with his!

They wrestled for a while until the Dragon King bit Jinwoo on the shoulder. Red flames sparked from the bite wound. Without panicking, Jinwoo grabbed the dragon by the horns and wrenched his head away before throwing a punch right in his face.

Ka-pow!

The Dragon King didn't fall back this time.

Graaaah!

He instantly shook it off and rushed back toward him, opening his jaws wide and clamping down on Jinwoo's hip.

"Argh!"

For the first time since they had begun their battle, Jinwoo couldn't hold back a cry of pain.

Pow! Pow! Pow!

Jinwoo slammed his elbow down on the dragon's head, but the Dragon King easily lifted Jinwoo and shook him like a rag doll. Jinwoo felt like his hip would snap and his body would split in two.

"Guh! Gaaaaah!"

Once he was satisfied with the damage, the Dragon King flung Jinwoo to the ground.

Thud!

A Breath of Destruction followed. In the aftermath of the hellfire, Jinwoo

noticed that one of his arms had vanished, but he bit back his scream. He quickly shortened the distance, shoved his other arm in the dragon's mouth, and tore the dragon's tongue out. It sounded like heated leather was being ripped.

"Auuughhh!"

Instead of blood, crimson-red lava gushed from the wound. As the dragon writhed in pain, Jinwoo whacked his head, spraying lava everywhere. The Dragon King narrowed his eyes and bashed his horns into the hunter.

It was a seesaw of a battle.

Ka-boom!

The land shook with each collision, and the flames and black lightning destroyed everything they touched. It was a gruesome battle.

Fang's mouth hung open as he watched in a daze as the two Monarchs clashed. He now understood why the Supreme Being would create the Rulers and Monarchs for entertainment. The fight between them was simultaneously a great disaster as well as a spectacular display of power. He couldn't stop his tears as he witnessed the two deities giving it their all.

Destruction and death were tangling together and shaking the whole world.

Jinwoo channeled more power into his fist.

Ka-pow!

It worked. It worked, it worked, it worked! His relentless punches tore through the air.

Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow!

The Dragon King's sharp claws narrowly missed him as the hunter took a quick step back.

Whoosh!

Jinwoo tackled the Dragon King's shoulder and knocked him to the ground.

Thud!

The Shadow Monarch swiftly jumped on top and whaled on him.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

The dragon found himself unable to move due to the merciless barrage.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

Lightning struck, sparks flew, and the very space around them seemed to warp. But one fist would certainly not be enough to deliver the fatal blow. Although Jinwoo was concentrating his mana in just one hand, it seemed to be weakening with every successive hit.

What's going on?

Jinwoo grimaced. The Dragon King picked up on it as well and snatched Jinwoo's fist. Jinwoo panicked when he couldn't escape the Dragon King's grip.

"This is the difference between our levels of experience!"

Jinwoo's eyes bulged out as the dragon plunged the claws of his other hand into Jinwoo's side. "Arghhh!"

The dragon sneered. "You consume quite a bit of stamina just to maintain this huge form."

Having immobilized Jinwoo, the Dragon King summoned the ultimate Breath of Destruction to finish off the hunter.

Victory was his!

The Dragon King was confident that he'd won.....until he spotted that Jinwoo's arm had regenerated.

Does he still have enough power to do that?

Regardless, he was certain Jinwoo could not defeat him in his condition. A bright light emanated from within the Dragon King's mouth. But at that moment, Jinwoo shoved his newly respawned arm into his maw.

"Ahhhhhh!"

He squeezed out every drop of power left in his body and concentrated it on the tips of his fingers.

Vwoooooom!

The resulting shock wave was accompanied by a blinding flash. Silence settled in the aftermath.

Jinwoo transformed back to human form and lay panting on the ground.

“Huff, huff, huff.....”

It felt like his entire body had been on fire, and every inch of his body was covered in wounds. Jinwoo caught his breath before slowly heaving himself up.

Someone was approaching him from the other side of the thick fog created by the explosion. Jinwoo groaned to see the Dragon King back in his human form.

What a monster.....

While the Dragon King had sustained his fair share of injuries, Jinwoo was definitely in worse shape.

“You’re quite a tenacious bastard.”

Jinwoo could say the same about the Dragon King, but instead of answering, he wordlessly pulled out both Kamish’s Wrath daggers to save some energy.

The Dragon King pulled out his sword in kind.

Shiing!

Despite being too exhausted to maintain his spiritual form, the Dragon King gathered every last ounce of energy he had in order to kill Jinwoo. The hunter also sucked in a breath and gritted his teeth.

With one leap, the Dragon King closed the distance and swung his blade. The daggers and sword clashed together continuously, their bodies spraying drops of sweat and blood.

Krak!

One of the Kamish’s Wrath daggers, which had retained a lot of wear and tear from chiseling away at the dragon scales earlier, broke.

.....!

The Dragon King’s sword came down at Jinwoo at an angle, so he pivoted his body to avoid it. In the process, the hunter lost his balance. The Dragon King took advantage of the moment and immediately stabbed Jinwoo’s stomach.

Shuuuk!

Jinwoo fought through the pain and swung his remaining dagger at the Dragon King's neck, but the Monarch of Destruction grabbed the blade in his bare hand. The black aura emanating from the dagger's blade was blocked by his own dark-crimson aura.

The Dragon King smirked. "Did you really think this dagger made from a dragon's tooth could penetrate the Dragon King's body?"

He put more pressure on his sword, forcing the blade deeper inside Jinwoo's stomach.

Jinwoo coughed out blood. "Gah!"

The Dragon King kicked Jinwoo as he pulled out his sword, sending the hunter tumbling. Jinwoo struggled to sit up but froze as he felt the Dragon King's sword at his throat.

.....

The Dragon King chuckled. "Don't you find this rather amusing?"

His expression oozed confidence and smugness as he looked down at his enemy.

"This is the battle between the flame born out of darkness and the darkness born out of light. And I suppose it has now reached its conclusion."

Jinwoo readily agreed. "Yeah. I can see the end."

Well then. The Dragon King inspected the severely injured Jinwoo from head to toe with both curiosity and amusement.

"Have you concluded that resistance is futile?"

Jinwoo's hopeless gaze suddenly lit up.

".....!"

Alarmed, the Dragon King hurriedly thrust his sword, but Jinwoo unexpectedly also charged forward. The sword barely missed an artery in Jinwoo's neck and shaved off a piece of skin. Blood gushed in all directions like a fountain, but it wasn't a fatal wound.

I can do this.

As an exchange for his injury, Jinwoo managed to summon his father's dagger from his inventory and stab at the Dragon King's chest before the startled Monarch could even comprehend what was happening.

Krak!

The dagger penetrated the armor and pierced the Dragon King's heart.

"Gahhhhhh!"

Jinwoo was just getting started. He knew it would take more than that to kill a Monarch. He himself was still fighting even after sustaining an injury that would've killed an ordinary human.

Jinwoo retrieved the dagger from the Dragon King's chest and activated Mutilation.

Shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk!

Countless stabs struck the Monarch of Destruction.

Again!

Shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk!

"You.....bastard.....!"

The Dragon King was able to raise his sword even as the countless dagger strikes shredded his body. Jinwoo couldn't believe his eyes. Even with a gaping hole in his chest, the Dragon King was successfully parrying Jinwoo's every strike. In fact, he seemed to be moving faster.

No wonder he was the ultimate creation, a being made from darkness purely for destruction by the Supreme Being.

Jinwoo had always been confident in his speed, but rivulets of sweat poured down his forehead as he struggled to keep up.

"Raaaah!" The Dragon King let out a roar as he pushed Jinwoo away.

It felt like Jinwoo's wrist had been snapped off.

Argh!

By the time Jinwoo regained his balance, the Dragon King was already right in front of him. Instead of repeating the mistake of taking his time, the Dragon King stabbed his sword straight into Jinwoo's black heart.

"Argh!"

A burning pain rose within Jinwoo's chest. Jinwoo felt as if he was suffocating and couldn't speak properly. His legs gave way, and he fell to his knees.

Thud.

The Dragon King flung his head back and let out a roar of dissatisfaction.

Graaaaaaaaaah!

He took the form of a dragonfolk, a human-dragon hybrid, and extended his long claws. His voice rumbled as he spoke.

"I shall tear you apart and feed your flesh to the wyverns!"

Attempting to kill the Shadow Monarch with the respect afforded a king had been a mistake, and the Dragon King now planned to kill him as gruesomely as possible to make up for said mistake. The enraged Dragon King bared his sharp fangs and let out another roar...

...which was answered by loud cries from above.

Whoooooo!

The Dragon King looked up to see an unbelievable sight.

The army of the Rulers—the soldiers of the sky—was endlessly pouring out of enormous gates. The dark clouds in the sky were no longer visible as the soldiers turned the sky into a sea of white.

Impossible.....!

The Dragon King was flabbergasted. He was sure he hadn't seen any gates upon his arrival here, so where had *these* gates come from? And how could the soldiers of the sky suddenly emerge from them? An incalculable amount of energy would be needed to open a gate connecting both worlds in this manner.

The Dragon King whipped his head around to stare at the panting Jinwoo.

"You..... Is this why you went all out from the start?"

It wasn't a mistake born from Jinwoo's inexperience. Every move had been calculated from the very beginning. His aim had been to use the clash of two Titans to create enough disturbances in the space around them so that the Rulers could come through.

Until now, the Dragon King had been considering Jinwoo's actions through his own lens. Catching the army of Chaos's attention, bringing the Dragon King here... The Monarch of Destruction had simply assumed Jinwoo had been luring him into a one-on-one fight.

Instead, the Shadow Monarch had something completely different in mind.

"But there is no way for you to contact the Rulers—"

No, there was a way: the vessels. There were still some vessels remaining to which the Rulers had lent their power. That was how the Rulers knew to spawn gates at this very location.

"....."

The Dragon King seethed. Unlike the Dragon King, who had been solely focused on winning their fight, Jinwoo had been fully prepared to lose this battle in order to win the war. It was the Dragon King's complete loss.

Jinwoo smiled through the pain.

"It was you, wasn't it?"

".....?"

"You were the one who commanded the Monarch of White Lightning and the Fang Monarch to attack the Shadow Monarch from behind."

".....Did the Monarch of White Lightning give the game away?"

Instead of responding, Jinwoo looked up at the sky as countless soldiers flew down toward them. He then looked back at the Dragon King with a smile.

"Ashborn sends his regards," said Jinwoo, flipping his middle finger at the Dragon King in the same breath. The Dragon King saw red.

"How dare you!"

He leaped at the defenseless Jinwoo, but six beautiful wings wrapped around

him before his claws could reach. The Dragon King withdrew his claws and groaned as his gaze fell upon the interloper.

“Ah, the brightest Fragment of Luminosity.....”

The Dragon King raised his head to see six more angels, each with six wings, slowly descending.

The fight had reached its conclusion.

The Dragon King snorted as he recalled that exchange with Jinwoo.

“.....I suppose this is the end.”

Soon, the Rulers’ spears impaled the Monarch of Destruction from every direction.



5

THE END OF THE WAR



5

THE END OF THE WAR

The two Monarchs' ferocious battle left remnants in the sky as the ash they had kicked up now drifted down peacefully like snow.

Jinwoo watched the first few flecks land on his shoulders, then looked up. Miles above his head, the armies of the Rulers blocked out the sky as they continued to emerge through the countless gates. Tens of millions of soldiers moved in an orderly fashion as commanded by the Rulers. It was an overwhelming sight.

Their mission was to purge the earth of the Monarchs' forces. Now that most of the Monarchs, including the Dragon King, had been eliminated, the armies of Chaos stood no chance, so the arrival of the soldiers signaled to them that the long, drawn-out war was finally over.

As he watched them depart for the battlefield, Jinwoo was surprised to feel his heart ache.

The indescribably beautiful brightest Fragment of Luminosity landed in front of Jinwoo and folded in his six wings. The other Rulers followed in turn.

The brightest Fragment of Luminosity took in the man before him. At a glance, Jinwoo seemed to be an ordinary human being.

And yet, this single human ended the war between us and the Monarchs.

Who could've imagined that the never-ending war started by the Supreme Being would be brought to an end by the hands of a fragile creature in a distant world?

The surprised brightest Fragment of Luminosity had nothing but respect for

Jinwoo.

“You have ended our war. I do not know how to express our appreciation.”

“.....” Jinwoo looked away from the falling ash to face the brightest Fragment of Luminosity.

“It’s a big ask, but I’d like to request a favor.”

“A favor.....?” The Ruler was puzzled. The Shadow Monarch’s power was comparable to theirs—possibly even stronger—but he had a favor to ask of them?

Jinwoo explained. “This is something only you can do.”

The Ruler acquiesced. “As long as it is within my power, I shall lend my aid.”

The Shadow Monarch had contributed much to the demise of the Dragon King, so the Rulers were indebted to him. There was no reason why the Rulers couldn’t grant Jinwoo’s request.

However, his favor was a rather difficult one to fulfill.

“One more time..... Could you use the Cup of Reincarnation one more time?”

The request completely blindsided the Rulers, and they stared at Jinwoo with their mouths agape.

The brightest Fragment of Luminosity asked, “You want us to use the Cup of Reincarnation to reverse time?”

“That’s right.” Jinwoo firmly nodded. “And once you’ve rewound time, I ask that you leave Earth alone. I’ll take care of the Monarchs and their armies myself in the rift between dimensions.”

Jinwoo’s request left the brightest Fragment of Luminosity speechless.

He..... He wants to fight in our stead?

The previous Shadow Monarch had explained the mechanics of the Cup of Reincarnation to Jinwoo. According to Ashborn, higher beings like the Rulers and Monarchs retained their memories even if a forbidden tool was used to undo the past. Now that Jinwoo and Ashborn had combined into one being, he would retain the Shadow Monarch’s powers and memories, which would allow

him to enact his plan and venture into the rift between dimensions.

“You mean to deal with the enemy’s army all by yourself?” The brightest Fragment of Luminosity asked in disbelief. “But why? We have used the Cup of Reincarnation again and again, but we have never had better results than this.”

.....

Jinwoo glanced down at his father’s dagger. “This war has claimed far too many lives. I want them back.”

If reversing time meant saving those people, Jinwoo was fully prepared to face the Monarchs all over again.

The brilliant Fragment of Luminosity closed his eyes in contemplation. He agreed with Jinwoo’s reasoning, but reversing time was extremely risky.

“The Cup of Reincarnation is at the end of its life. While I do believe in your proven ability, we will not get another opportunity should your plan fail.”

A harsher, more terrifying future could await them. In other words, the current situation might already be the best possible outcome.

“You could forever remain in people’s memories as the hero who stopped the invasion of the Monarchs. However, no one save yourself will remember the war you seek to initiate. If you lose, destruction awaits. Even if you win, no one will celebrate your victory.”

The brightest Fragment of Luminosity’s sorrow was evident.

“Do you still wish to reverse time?”

Instead of answering, Jinwoo closed his eyes and thought of the people important to him. Through the eyes of the soldiers he’d placed in their shadows, Jinwoo could see them in this moment. His mother and sister were clutching each other’s hands as they watched the news coming from Japan with concern. Haein was praying desperately with her eyes shut tight. Jinchul’s teary eyes were glued to his TV. Jinwoo basked in the warmth of their genuine concern.

When he opened his eyes, he had made his decision.

“Yes. Reverse time.”

For those who yet lived, and for the fallen: President Gunhee Go, Adam White, his father..... And there were many more people who had become casualties of war. Jinwoo was determined to never lose anyone ever again.

To the brightest Fragment of Luminosity, his resolve was ironclad.

“.....”

The Rulers had deigned to go as far as using a forbidden tool to save this world only because it had become their battlefield. But now, the hero, a citizen of the world he had saved, was choosing to save the entirety of the world instead of settling for saving a fraction of it. And not only that, but he also wanted to shoulder the burden all by himself.

For a second, the brightest Fragment of Luminosity thought he saw Ashborn's face overlapping Jinwoo's. The previous Shadow Monarch had been a stubborn colleague who stood his ground to protect his master, the Supreme Being, until the bitter end. He had been a terrifying enemy, but the brightest Fragment of Luminosity held just as much respect for him.

.....This man resembles him.

The thought of Ashborn brought a gentle smile to the Ruler's face.

“I see. Then I shall pray for your victory.”

“Hold on.” Jinwoo had a question. “What happens to the soldiers who didn't exist in the past?”

For example, Beru. Ashborn's original soldiers would remain as shadow soldiers, but what would happen to Beru, who hadn't existed ten years ago, or Greed, who had been created from a human named Dongsoo Hwang?

“Beings who will overlap in the past will disappear while the others will remain.”

In other words, Beru would stay but Greed would disappear. Jinwoo could hear the lamentations of the soldiers in his shadow. In his mind, he bid farewell to the soldiers who would have to depart. Then he looked up with a grin.

“I'm ready.”

The brightest Fragment of Luminosity summoned the Cup of Reincarnation

from a different dimension and nodded.

“May your courage save your world.”

The world was bathed in light.

Soon after, a local newspaper published a short article about a middle school student who disappeared and left behind a note saying that he had some business to take care of.

Two years later, the safe return of the missing middle school student caused a small stir. But the world quickly returned to normal, and time quietly passed as if nothing had happened.

There was no longer any need for gates, magic beasts, or hunters.

* * *

Jinho was frozen stiff at the welcome party for incoming freshmen. Despite the mouthwatering smell of grilled pork belly permeating the store, his nerves made him lose his appetite.

And it was the strangest thing. Though he was currently keeping his family situation on the down low, he'd led a pretty cushy life as the second son of a wealthy businessman. So why did this very affordable frozen pork belly franchise feel so familiar?

What's up with that?

One of the upperclassmen slung his arm around Jinho's shoulders. “Loosen up, Jinho! I promise we don't bite.”

Flustered, Jinho squeaked, “N-no, it's not like that, sir!”

“That right there, stop talking like that.” The upperclassman teased him with a laugh, then paused. “Oh, but there is one guy you should be careful around. There's this really scary guy in our department.”

“Oh.” Jinho tensed up.

“He's one of those, y'know..... It's not like he gives his juniors a hard time per se, but his charisma is off the charts so that it's hard even standing next to him.....”

Jinho knew someone exactly like that: his father, the iron-blooded CEO. He quickly shook his head to get rid of that thought.

The upperclassman seemed to be getting rather tipsy, as he continued chattering loudly about the scary man.

“D’you know Haein Cha?”

“Um..... You mean the shining star of the track-and-field world, the athlete Haein Cha?”

“Yeah, her. She’s his girlfriend, if you can believe it. Whoops, here he comes.”

The upperclassman bolted to his feet and gave a polite bow as another young man entered the restaurant. “Hello, sir!”

“Sir!”

“Hi, sir!”

It was clear from the sight that the upperclassman hadn’t been exaggerating. The mood at the loud and lively welcome party for freshmen changed completely with his appearance.

Jinho’s mouth went dry. It was just his luck that the scary man took a seat right next to him even though Jinho was so nervous, he couldn’t bring himself to lift his head.

Oh no..... Of all the empty seats.....!

Jinho quietly sighed to himself when the scary upperclassman handed him a glass.

“Have a drink.”

Was he seriously handing him an entire glass of soju? Jinho figured it wasn’t a joke and was unable to refuse.

I’m not much of a drinker, though.....

Jinho squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to take a sip. His eyes widened at the taste.

“I-is this soda?”

“That’s right.” The supposedly scary upperclassman waved the bottle of soda in his hand with a friendly expression. “Wanna help me finish this off?”

In fact, the upperclassman seemed happy and relaxed, like he was meeting up with an old friend.

“And, Jinho, what’s with the ‘sir’? C’mon, now.” He laughed as he refilled Jinho’s empty glass. “Just call me ‘bro.’”

“Pardon?”

“What? You don’t like it?”

When the smile slipped off the upperclassman’s face, Jinho instinctively straightened his back and answered firmly.

“N-no, I do, boss!”

Huh? He’d called him “boss” without thinking, but it somehow felt right.

And.....did I ever tell him my name?

Jinho broke out of his thoughts as the upperclassman clinked his glass against Jinho’s.

“Cheers.”

There was something so familiar about that smile. Jinho blinked away tears as he toasted him back.

“Cheers!”

* * *

Jinho’s voice came over the phone.

“By the way, boss, why didn’t I see you in the student lounge?”

Jinwoo chuckled. “I have an errand to run today. Oh, and, Jinho?”

“Yes, boss?”

“Something came up, so I’m counting on you to go to my afternoon class for me.”

“Huh? Hang on, boss? Boss?”

Jinwoo ignored Jinho’s desperate calls and hung up.

Click.

Jinwoo took in the big sign of the Seoul Ilshin Hospital up ahead. There was someone he needed to meet today.

He had paused to straighten out his clothes before entering the hospital when a familiar face caught his eye. Jinwoo wasn't planning on getting her attention, but she felt his stare and turned.

".....?"

It was Joohee, the B-rank healer who frightened easily but still had joined the Hunter's Association to try to put her powers to good use. Now, she was just an ordinary college girl.

She seemed to be flourishing now that she wasn't a hunter, so Jinwoo couldn't hold back a pleased smile.

Joohee stared at Jinwoo for a while before working up the courage to ask him, "Um..... Do I know you?"

Jinwoo swallowed the instinctive greeting that rose in his throat and shook his head.

"Nope."

Without missing a beat, he turned around. Joohee stared at his back for a while, then shrugged and went on her way.

Jinwoo gave a satisfied grin as he listened to her footsteps get farther away. This was exactly what he'd fought so hard to protect: peaceful days and the lives they were meant to live. Running into the fruits of his labor every so often like this served as yet another reminder that it had been worth it.

Good enough for me.

This was good enough for Jinwoo.

Jinwoo stopped in front of the hospital for a bit to look down at the permanent burn scar on his left hand before slowly making his way inside. If anyone ever asked him about it, he would tell them he got it while saving the world.

The patient waved over the attending physician. “Could you.....help me sit up?”

The doctor rushed over and carefully helped lift the patient’s torso.

“Thank you.”

The doctor noticed a wooden bottle on the patient’s bedside table that he’d never seen before.

“What’s this, sir?”

The patient, who had lost so much weight that he resembled a withered tree, was racked with coughs as he explained. “Some young man came in just now and gave it to me.”

The attending physician was alarmed.

This was a VIP room, and two burly bodyguards stood by the door around the clock. No visitors were allowed to enter without the doctor’s permission, so who could have waltzed in here and left this bottle?

“Strange, don’t you think? And the young man told me something even more unbelievable.....”

According to the young man, he and the patient had fought against monsters in a previous timeline that no longer existed. The young man had come to give him a token of appreciation for all the help the patient had given him.

“Then the young man disappeared just like that, like a mirage. It was like he was never here.”

Had there been no evidence, the doctor wouldn’t have given this story a second thought, but with the bottle left plainly on the table, the doctor didn’t know what to make of things.

The patient pointed a shaky finger at the bottle. “Bring it...to me.”

The doctor put the wooden bottle in the patient’s hand.

The patient chuckled. “He said drinking the contents of this bottle would cure my illness. Ha-ha.”

“Sir, surely you don’t believe—”

“I am tired.” The patient cut off his doctor. “Let me ask you one thing. Let’s say I don’t drink this. How much time do I have left?”

“.....”

The doctor couldn’t answer him. Modern medicine was barely keeping the patient alive. In fact, that he’d lasted this long was a miracle.

The patient sucked his teeth at his doctor’s silence.

“If this drink does me in.....write this on my tombstone: ‘Here lies President Gunhee Go. He fought his illness to the end.’”

“Sir.....”

As a doctor, he should’ve stopped his patient, but he couldn’t bring himself to do so.

The determined chairman popped open the lid and swallowed the liquid with difficulty.

Gulp, gulp.

As he poured the last drop into his mouth, President Go recalled the look in the eyes of the young man who had given him the bottle. No matter what anyone said, President Go had decided that he could trust a young man with eyes like that.

Once the bottle was empty.....

Ba-dump!

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

President Go’s faltering heartbeat stabilized for the first time in a long while.

The heart was beating properly once more.

BONUS STORIES



BONUS STORIES

1.

Ask any student on the street what they want to be in the future and ten times out of ten, they'll say one of three jobs: a famous hunter, a staff member of a large guild, or an employee of the Hunter's Association.

A dumb kid would bank on becoming a famous hunter and waste their time.

A smarter kid would aim for a large guild where people get paid according to their talents.

The smartest kid would choose the Hunter's Association, where the pay was just as good as a large guild and there was less of a chance of getting fired, since employees were considered government workers.

I was a smart kid. A very smart one, too, so when I told my parents that I wanted to work for the Hunter's Association, they were actually a little disappointed. My father was hoping I'd be a judge and my mother, a doctor.

Of course, I was fully aware that my parents were hoping their one and only son would follow in their respective footsteps. However, I had a dream, and that dream helped me to successfully become an employee of the Hunter's Association.

"Why do you want to join the Hunter's Association?"

President Gunhee Go asked me this question during my job interview. At the time, I was all stiff, scolding myself for messing up my answers to the other interviewers' questions. But as soon as I heard that question, the look in my eyes changed as I gave it my full attention.

"Even at this moment, hunters all over are protecting civilians at the risk of

their own lives. Then.....who are the ones who risk their lives for the hunters?"

I loudly declared my intent to be one of the people protecting the hunters as a member of the Hunter's Association. I might have imagined the impressed murmurs that sounded around the room, but I clearly remember the smile that graced President Go's face in that moment.

That's how I was able to become what many others dreamed of being: an employee of the Hunter's Association. My parents were slightly saddened to see me go, but with their blessing, I left my beloved hometown and started my new job at the headquarters in Seoul.

I was quite excited to get one step closer to fulfilling my goal of being someone who could help keep hunters safe. Things really seemed to be going my way.

However, my first day on the job shattered my fantasy.

I held the delusion that there was still something left that I could do when nine years had already passed since awakened beings, gates, and magic beasts first appeared in this world. After many failures and missteps, society had already settled into a stable status quo. From the start, there never was anything a mere entry-level staff member venturing into the world on their own for the first time in their life could hope to do.

Instead, I was assigned to the support team, where I would do all sorts of odd jobs. Calling them "odd jobs" was an understatement, though. The reality was, we were catering to the whims of the hunters working under the association.

"Hey, hunters in the next neighborhood get coffee or snacks before their raid. What about us?"

"There's something I urgently need money for. Could I get an advance this month?"

"If I join today's raid, I don't have anyone who can pick my kid up in my place. Would you be able to do it?"

And so it went. Someone had to take care of low-rank gates that didn't pay as well, and there were only so many hunters, so I had no choice but to meet their demands. The worst days were when hunters filed a complaint. And if a hunter

who lodged a complaint suddenly threatened to quit the association?

I was growing exhausted, running around trying to prevent that from happening. But while it was far from my ideal, I was slowly getting used to things.

One day, when I felt like I'd been put through the wringer, I got a phone call.

Riiing, riiing!

I wondered which hunter was calling to gripe at me this time. I picked up my phone with a sigh and was met with an irritated shout.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to send Jinwoo Sung?!”

I didn't know what he was talking about, but I defaulted to an apology.

“I'm sorry, sir. There must have been an error when the raid team was being assembled. Could you please explain what the issue was?”

“What is there to explain? I don't want any dead weight on my team. One hit and he goes down. And we're supposed to clean up after his ass? I'm quitting if this happens again!”

And then he hung up on me.

I reminded myself to have patience as I placed the receiver down, then pulled up the data on the hunter the man on the phone had mentioned in an effort to nip this in the bud. I didn't think much of it, since people demanded squad member changes for a variety of reasons, including insubordination, lack of chemistry with the team, not being good enough at fighting, and so on.

Sung, Sung..... He said his first name was Jinwoo?

As soon as I saw Hunter Jinwoo Sung's file, I realized what the problem was.

Huh.....?

He was an E rank, and his level of magic power was the lowest even among the E-rank hunters.

Based on these stats, this man is basically a regular civilian.

As expected, he had a long list of injuries on record.

“Whoa.” I slammed his file shut in utter shock.

This..... This had to be wrong. If I pretended that I didn’t see anything, he could very well be killed in the near future.

It was then that I remembered my initial dream. Hunters risked their lives to protect civilians, but who put their lives on the line for the hunters?

I nodded resolutely. A year after I joined the Hunter’s Association, for the very first time I found something I could do.

* * *

Step one was talking to my boss. However, no one, from my immediate supervisor to his supervisor to the supervisor of that supervisor, was willing to get involved. In the end, I had to speak to the head of the support team.

“Sir, a person’s life is on the line. Avoiding the issue isn’t the solution here.”

The head of the team looked like he was seconds away from chewing out the newbie who used to be a team player, but that didn’t stop me from speaking my mind.

“If the hunter dies during a raid, how are you going to explain his death to his family?”

“Hey now, don’t jinx it.....”

“But it is a very real possibility for Hunter Sung. Please look at his hospital records. It’s a miracle that he’s still alive.”

“.....”

The manager took a minute to look over the documents I had brought, then looked up. “Are you saying the association needs to step in and bar Mr. Sung from working as a hunter?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

If Hunter Sung continued this line of work, death would be inevitable.

“You say this knowing Hunter Sung’s situation, right?”

I nodded. I was aware that Hunter Sung’s mother was in the intensive care unit on life support and that her hospital bill was being subsidized, since he was

affiliated with the association.

“But no one has ever woken up from the Eternal Sleep Disease. A living person shouldn’t die for a dead person, right?”

Tons of people were dying from the Eternal Sleep Disease at this very moment. It was unfortunate, but I couldn’t continue to shepherd Hunter Sung toward death for the sake of his mother. I had to save him at least.

Though the team head kept trying to dissuade me, I had made up my mind, and he eventually gave in.

“Fine.” Seeing my face light up, my manager added a condition. “However, you’ll need to convince Hunter Sung. He has to agree to this.”

That was to be expected. I would never kick Hunter Sung out of the association without his consent. I had my work cut out for me.

I nodded resolutely. “Understood, sir.”

* * *

I had never worked this hard on anything in my entire life. The most research I ever did wasn’t for a presentation in front of my superiors or studying for a difficult exam but to persuade a single man.

Hunter Sung is twenty-three.....which makes him six years younger than me.

I was so thorough that I was fairly confident going in. I was ready to lecture Hunter Sung about how he needed to quit working as a hunter and bring him to his senses. I was going to convince Hunter Sung that he needed to value his life as much as his mother’s.

Ding!

The café door opened to reveal the face I had seen only as a picture in a file until now. I froze as soon as I spotted him.

Hunter Sung looked around the café until he spotted me and took a seat across from me.

“Hello.”

As he greeted me, I found myself unable to say anything I had prepared.

* * *

“We’ve tried, too, you know.”

I accepted a small glass of soju from my team head and grimaced as I knocked it back. Whether it was from the burn of the alcohol or because of the heaviness in my heart, I couldn’t tell. My brow remained wrinkled.

“Still..... It isn’t right, sir. It shouldn’t be like this. A twenty-three-old man shouldn’t have that look in his eyes.”

I figured Hunter Sung would be the overconfident type who was convinced he couldn’t die or the reckless type who was desperate for someone to stop him. Whichever one he was, I was confident I could persuade him.

However, Jinwoo Sung was completely different from what I’d expected. He was all too aware of the reality. He had the wan smile of someone who was trembling in fear and yet barely managing to overcome it.

How could I push someone who had come so far to the edge of a cliff? I couldn’t do it. And I realized that I couldn’t blame my superiors for not being able to do something I couldn’t do, either.

My team head quietly refilled my shot glass. “So why did you choose the Hunter’s Association?”

“I.....”

I hung my head as I recalled the moment when I first decided that I wanted to help hunters.

“When I was a kid, I was watching the news, and there was a story about a hunter who got trapped in a dungeon while trying to save his colleagues.”

I’d seen footage of hunters bleeding out and writhing in pain in an amusement park, a place people go to have fun. It got me thinking.

“Those people are bleeding because they saved others, but who’s gonna save them?”

My parents couldn’t answer my question, and that’s when I decided that if no one else could, then I would be the one to help them. I would do my best to keep hunters from getting hurt or dying.

“But in the end, I’m no different than everyone else.”

I couldn't be of any help to Hunter Sung as he faced death. There was nothing I could do.

My team head watched me wallowing in my misery and put down his shot glass.

"What if there is something you can do?"

"Huh?"

I looked up as my manager pulled out a file of a high-rank awakened being from his bag and handed it to me.

"There are some people who aren't materialistic and aren't hunters despite being high-rank awakened beings."

".....?"

"How about helping the association's hunters by persuading those people to join us?"

I perked up and looked down at the file.

"Joohee Lee, a B-rank healer....."

A high-rank healer! If a person like her worked for the association, she could prevent serious injuries and fatalities. Even a weak hunter would be able to fight as much as they wanted without worry. Hunter Sung's expression crossed my mind.

My team head saw the gleam in my eyes and smiled. "So what do you think? Do you want to give it a go?"

I was practically staring holes into the file as I nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes! I'll do my best!"

2.

Ash continued to fall from the sky like snowflakes.

Jinwoo finished saying good-bye to the shadow soldiers who he'd have to part with and faced the leader of the Rulers without any hesitation.

“I’m ready.”

The despondent brightest Fragment of Luminosity summoned a cup. Jinwoo eyed it curiously.

So that’s the Cup of Reincarnation, the forbidden tool that can reverse time.....

Jinwoo found himself swallowing hard as it sank in that it was time to start all over again.

His nervousness didn’t escape the brightest Fragment of Luminosity.

“...Are you sure you won’t regret this?”

After the countless hours he had spent fighting the Monarchs, he knew better than anyone about the burden of war. He also understood the weight the Shadow Monarch would now carry on his own.

The second Shadow Monarch nodded. He’d won the war once already, so things would only go better this time around. They would have to. Seeing the resolve and confidence on Jinwoo’s face, the Ruler nodded in turn.

Jinwoo had the resolve to get back what he had lost to the war. As someone who had rebelled against the Supreme Being for the sake of his fallen subordinates, he understood what that was like.

“May your courage save your world.”

With that sincere wish, the brightest Fragment of Luminosity flipped the Cup of Reincarnation upside down. The light filling the cup poured out, soaking the earth. The world was bathed in a gleaming light.

The soldiers who had sustained injuries on the battlefield, their mournful families receiving reports on the soldiers via TV, those praying for their loved ones’ safety, those who felt sick to their stomachs watching the news, those hanging their heads in despair. Everyone saw the bright light coming through their windows from their homes, cars, hospitals, schools, and workplaces. Soon, the world was covered in light.

Then, just as the light quickly and quietly engulfed the whole world, it disappeared without a trace.

Morning.

Through his closed eyes, Jinwoo could feel the sun's rays and the familiar texture of the bedding he lay on top of. Despite not being fully awake, Jinwoo could sense what was going on in his surroundings thanks to his superhuman perception.

Jinah coming out of the bathroom after washing up, the sound of cooking and the smell of stew simmering, my scent lingering in my room.....

He was home. Jinwoo had returned to his home.

His heart slowly began to race.

Then he heard his mother's voice outside his room. "Jinah, can you wake up your brother?"

Right. She was a growing kid, which meant that she loved sleep but still sprang out of bed in the morning as little kids tend to do. That led to her often waking up her brother per their mother's request.

"Kay!"

It felt like a memory of his childhood was playing in real time, and a smile formed on his face.

Creak.

"Jinwoooo....."

Jinwoo slowly sat up before his sister had completely opened the door.

"Huh? You're already up?"

Jinah blinked in surprise to see him awake. Jinwoo smiled fondly at the sight of her in the doorway. There stood a Jinah who hadn't lost her friends to magic beasts.

Jinwoo got out of bed and brushed past his sister to head to the living room.

"Good morning, Jinwoo."

Hearing footsteps behind her, his mother looked over at him as she prepared breakfast. Jinwoo no longer had to see his mother struggling to wake up from the Eternal Sleep Disease.

But there was something else he wanted to see more than anything.

Jinwoo heard a newspaper page being turned and looked toward the dining table. His father was quietly reading the paper as he waited on breakfast. Sensing Jinwoo's gaze, he looked up. Jinwoo's breath caught as he and his father made eye contact.

"Father....."

The word came out of Jinwoo's mouth without him realizing it. Ilhwan raised an eyebrow, since the Jinwoo he knew usually called him "Dad." He noticed that Jinwoo was fighting back tears. Maybe he'd had a bad dream?

Ilhwan walked over to him. "What's the matter, son?"

Jinwoo was face-to-face with his dad and could hear his voice. To Jinwoo, who vividly remembered the sight of his father disintegrating into sand and slipping through his fingers, it felt like a dream.

However, it wasn't a dream but a reality he had to protect by any means necessary.

The sorrow in his eyes faded, replaced with fierce determination. His father and mother stood in front of him, looking at him with concern. Jinwoo managed to slap on a smile.

".....I think I had a nightmare."

Right. The nightmare was over. His sister was a young kid, his mother was healthy, and his father was present. He had been given one last chance to make it all right, and he wasn't going to squander the opportunity. He was going to rewrite the future.

His steely eyes glinted with resolve.

* * *

It felt like he'd only returned yesterday, but a week had already passed. He'd yet to find a good time to enter the gap between dimensions.

He rested his chin on his hand and looked outside the classroom window in a daze.

Beru called out to him. "My king....."

I know.

Jinwoo knew that the Monarchs who coveted this world were most likely preparing a huge gate on the other side of the sky at this moment. But after having finished a monstrous battle, this felt like a short break. Couldn't he enjoy the peace just a little as a reward?

.....

Jinwoo was brought out of his musings by a welcome sound.

Ding-dong, ding-dong!

It was the final dismissal bell. The languishing children suddenly perked up, brimming with energy. Jinwoo lit up as well. He might be twenty-five years old inside, but he'd physically returned to being a fourteen-year-old kid.

After a chorus of good-byes to their teacher, several boys sporting short styles crowded around Jinwoo.

"Hey, Jinwoo!"

"You're coming to the Internet café, right?"

Their excitement was infectious, and Jinwoo laughed and nodded.

"Awesome!"

"Hey, hey. Jinwoo is on our team today, okay?"

"Huh? What're you talking about? He was on your team yesterday."

"But we also had Jongsik, the worst player ever."

"Oh, whatever. We'll take both Jongsik and Minpyo, too, if we get Jinwoo."

"Rock-paper-scissors!"

"Fine!"

Jinwoo had shown off his next-level reflexes and perception when playing an online multiplayer game that was all the rage. At their age, one's video game skills was equivalent to one's popularity among the guys, so everyone was dying to have Jinwoo on their team.

The best out of three games of rock-paper-scissors turned into best out of

five. The female students not interested in video games rolled their eyes at the fierce match to get Jinwoo on their team.

At the back of the classroom, a boy surreptitiously watched the others as he slowly packed his things. He was into video games but had a hard time making friends. This boy could only watch with envy at the others hanging out as a group.

Jinwoo chuckled to himself. He could see things he hadn't been able to see when he was younger. Was it because he was an adult now or due to his raised perception? This classroom was a microcosm of emotions colliding and commingling.

"Yeaaaaah!" The kids on Jinwoo's team burst into cheers with no regard as to how they were being perceived.

Jinwoo shook his head internally.

No wonder girls think boys are idiots.....

The winners circled around Jinwoo, smiling brightly. "Let's go, Jinwoo!"

Jinwoo's response was to point toward the back of the classroom. "I wanna team up with him."

"Huh?"

The other boys turned their heads toward the kid quietly packing his bag. He froze like a block of ice when he realized everyone was staring at him.

"Huh...? Me?"

"Yeah, you." Seeing the boy's conflicted expression, Jinwoo smiled at him. "Why? You don't want to?"

"N-no, I do!" The boy smiled shyly.

Jinwoo picked up his backpack. "Then let's go."

The boy nodded as he strapped on his backpack. "Y-yeah!"

Jinwoo laughed.

Just a little. Just a teensy bit longer. If it didn't harm anyone, couldn't Jinwoo enjoy these kinds of moments for at least one more day?

If only.....

His footsteps were light and quite heavy at the same time as he left the classroom with his friends. The sky was painted red as the sun set behind the hill at the back of the school. Jinwoo stopped walking for a minute to take it in.

His friends called to him.

“Jinwoo! What’re you doing?”

“There won’t be any seats at this rate.”

Geez, so much nagging.....

“I’m coming, coming.”

He caught up with them in no time. The boys chattered on about the great match ahead of them. Jinwoo could share in their excitement and anticipation even without taking part in the conversation.

As he made his way down the street under the red sky with these friends he hadn’t seen in ages, Jinwoo broke into a wide grin.

* * *

Ever since entering the rift between dimensions, Jinwoo had picked up a new habit. He started keeping a journal of everything he saw and heard on that day. He wasn’t necessarily doing it for some grand reason like recording his fight against the Monarchs. The rift between dimensions was a void much like the world of eternal rest. This place of nothingness contained only endless darkness, and it was hard to stay sane when not in the middle of battle.

However, Jinwoo wasn’t journaling for a lack of other things to do. Being able to go through these years in his life a second time made him realize that people’s perspectives could change over the years. He realized he noticed things he hadn’t in the moment.

Jinwoo wanted to see how he would feel when reading his journal sometime in the distant future after his memories of this place grew hazy. Would it embarrass him that he’d kept a diary? Or would he be filled with regret for not doing better? Or would he perhaps miss this tiresome war?

And so he continued to write in the journal when he could. The sound of his

pen gliding over paper echoed in the endless darkness. He let out a sudden laugh.

.....I probably won't miss what happened here, right?

He glanced up at the sea of corpses lying all over the place. Jinwoo had secured another victory in a battle by killing the Transfiguration Monarch, who had been giving him a hard time.

Twenty-seven years had passed since he entered the rift between dimensions. Finally, the end of this long, tedious, and brutal war was nigh. The only enemies left were the Dragon King and his army of destruction.

His heart raced at the thought of going home soon.

I'm glad that time in here and at home move at different speeds.

About two years would have passed out there. How much would Jinah have changed? How were his father and mother doing? Should Jinwoo have explained more details to his family? Various worries swirled through his head.

No.

Jinwoo shook his head to rid himself of those thoughts. It was time to focus on what would be recorded on the final page of this journal.

Just then, Bellion approached Jinwoo and bowed. "My lord, it is done. We left no survivors."

The shadow soldiers had come back from inspecting the battlefield to ensure all their enemies were dead. He looked around at his army as they stood in front of Jinwoo and awaited his next command. Jinwoo had given up counting their numbers a long time ago.

He smiled, and he closed his journal. "Good."

He put the journal and pen into his inventory and climbed down from the mountain of corpses he had been sitting on.

He'd been looking forward to meeting the first and only being to defeat him since becoming the Shadow Monarch. Sure, he'd won the war thanks to the arrival of the Rulers, but Jinwoo had technically lost to the Dragon King.

...I won't lose a second time.

Jinwoo's eyes were ablaze as his heart began to pound in anticipation.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

Listening to his heartbeat, Jinwoo was struck with the thought that he might actually miss this fight once it was over.

Jinwoo turned in the direction the Dragon King's energy was coming from and summoned his soldiers for the final battle.

"Arise."

At the Shadow Monarch's command, new shadow soldiers rose from the endless pile of corpses. His three marshals, Bellion, Beru, and Igris, stood directly behind Jinwoo. The generals stood behind them, and behind them, an army large enough to blanket the entire continent stood on standby.

.....

Despite the air being still, it felt like the winds of war were blowing. Jinwoo closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Upon opening them again, he spoke the words that heralded the end of the war. "It's time to kill the Dragon King."

* * *

The Dragon King sensed a group of soldiers headed his way that was so large, he couldn't get an estimate of their numbers.

The Shadow Monarch had initially favored a hit-and-run tactic, but some time ago, he had switched to fighting them head-on. Instead of running after Jinwoo, the army of Chaos found themselves being chased.

Finally, the army of destruction was the only one remaining, so it was obvious where the Shadow Monarch would strike next.

It would be the last battle. The Dragon King had never thought that the end would be decided by a battle between two Monarchs. Nevertheless, it was fitting, as his blood still boiled at the thought of his previous clash with the Shadow Monarch many years ago.

.....

One of his subordinates cautiously approached the Dragon King. “Sire.....”

The Dragon King folded his arms and announced, “Yogmunt has been killed.”

The subordinate was taken aback to learn of the Transfiguration Monarch’s fate, and he lowered his head. “Sire, perhaps you should move away—”

“No.” The Dragon King bared his teeth, emanating a bloodred hostile aura. “I am tired of showing my back to the enemy. I will fight him here.”

The Shadow Monarch had spent more than twenty years hunting down the Monarchs’ soldiers. They wouldn’t give the army of destruction time to reorganize themselves. If they couldn’t escape Jinwoo’s advance, then the Dragon King preferred to end things right here.

The Dragon King made his decision. “Prepare for battle!”

The army of destruction reacted at his command.

Roooooooooar!

The dragons, dragonfolk, ancient dragons, and wyverns reared up and let out a massive roar.

Here they come!

The Dragon King turned as he sensed a mass of power moving closer. It was clear how the Monarchs’ armies had been defeated by the Shadow Monarch all along.

.....What excellent mobilization.

The Monarchs’ armies couldn’t have kept up with the Shadow Army’s movements, since Jinwoo could transport his soldiers freely. The Shadow Army could instantly approach or pull away, no matter the distance.

The Dragon King witnessed the cause of their defeat with his own eyes. The Shadow Monarch quietly rose from the darkness, accompanied by several million incredibly powerful soldiers swathed in darkness.

The Shadow Monarch! The sheer presence of the shadow army was so forceful that it startled the Dragon King. After dozens of years, the shadow army

was more powerful than ever before.

Ah-ha-ha-ha!

The Dragon King chortled. “Incredible. Truly incredible, O King of the Dead.”

How the tables had turned since their last meeting. The shadow army now eclipsed the army of destruction.

“I never thought you’d be able to take our entire army. Who knew you’d come this far?”

Clad in black armor, the Shadow Monarch stared in silence. He had matured as the Shadow Monarch, clearly much stronger than before.

As his base instincts as a wild dragon stirred, the Dragon King itched to rip such a powerful adversary to shreds and devour him. However, it was too early to know whether this feeling was a blessing or a curse. He simply wanted to relish it a while longer.

Luckily, the Dragon King had a question he’d wanted to ask.

“Tell me. Why did the Rulers use the Cup of Reincarnation? Why did they revive the dead Monarchs and the soldiers?”

The Dragon King had perished at the hands of the Rulers. He vividly remembered the pain from the spears that had impaled him on that day. The loss of their leader was sure to cause the army of Chaos to crumble, and the long war between the Monarchs and the Rulers would end as a victory for the Rulers. Even the Monarchs had to admit it was a total defeat.

But for whatever reason, they had revived all the Monarchs, including the Dragon King, by using the Cup of Reincarnation to reverse time. Since then, the Dragon King had deliberated as to the reason behind their decision, but he’d come up with nothing. Thus, he had no choice but to query the Shadow Monarch, who had been on the side of the Rulers.

“It was my request.”

The Dragon King was bewildered at the unexpected answer. “What.....?”

Jinwoo clarified, clearly and slowly. “I asked for this. I asked the Rulers to use the Cup of Reincarnation because I wanted to kill you with my own hands.”

He was out of his mind! The Dragon King almost spat out a litany of curses but managed to hold his tongue. The Shadow Monarch had used the forbidden tool to turn back time, just so he could fight ten million soldiers with a mere 100,000.

It made no sense, but at least the Dragon King now knew why the Rulers had used the Cup of Reincarnation and why the Shadow Monarch had been so proactive. There was no greater reason.

“Ha-ha..... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” The Dragon King burst out laughing, shaking his head in disbelief.

The Shadow Monarch had wanted to fight the Monarchs’ armies on his own, and he’d successfully managed to drive them into a corner. The Dragon King couldn’t help but respect the Shadow Monarch for doing the impossible.

The Shadow Monarch had reached the final hurdle. Would he eat or be eaten? For the first time, the Dragon King wanted to know the name of his opponent.

“Antares.”

It was the name given to him by the Supreme Being, and he’d never shared it with anyone until now.

“That is my name.” The Dragon King earnestly spoke. “What is yours?”

The Shadow Monarch deigned to answer the last question the Dragon King would ever ask.

“Jinwoo Sung.” The Shadow Monarch posed a question of his own. “Do you have anything left to say?”

The power of death drifted from Jinwoo’s shoulders as a black aura. It was much easier to call upon it in the rift between dimensions, since the place was similar to the world of eternal rest. The shadow soldiers responded to their Monarch.

Rahhhhh!

The entire shadow army cried out.

The Dragon King smirked at the noise.

What is there left to say.....?

What else did he need to say at the great feast being presented to him?

“Not at all.”

The Dragon King and Jinwoo both transformed into the astral bodies of a flaming dragon and giant made of darkness respectively. The two mountains faced off against each other.

Graaaaaah!

The Dragon King’s roar shook the area, and the army of destruction charged forward.

Jinwoo wordlessly pointed ahead, and with that, his army of close to ten million instantly mobilized just as he ran toward the Dragon King at full speed.

This reunion with the Dragon King marked the end of a long, long war. Jinwoo had been waiting for this moment.

A menacing glow gathered in the Dragon King’s mouth. It was time for Jinwoo to show him the result of his cumulative battle experience from both timelines.

Time slowed as Jinwoo focused solely on the Dragon King.

Just as the Breath of Destruction left the Dragon King’s mouth, Jinwoo gathered his black aura on one fist and swung.

In the rift between dimensions, light and darkness collided once more.

3.

People across the United States were in a panic over the psychic’s prophecy.

“The god of death will soon descend on this land!”

Normally, people would wave off predictions like these that sounded like the tagline of a comic book. However, this prophecy came from Norma Sellner.

Norma Sellner’s spiritual eyes had opened two years earlier. Since then, she had been the talk of the town for her accurate predictions regarding matters such as the death of the North Korean leader, a terrorist airplane hijacking, the

stock market crash due to the housing crisis, and so on. For someone of her caliber to predict the apocalypse was a huge deal.

The media had dubbed Mrs. Sellner the Unerring Prophet, and after her proclamation, she was slammed with interview requests. However, she rejected all of them except one. She personally called up a reporter she was friendly with and said the following:

“The god of death will land on this planet with his infinite army. Just like we can’t escape death, there is no way to run away from the god of death.”

The very next day, when an enormous black hole covered the sky over Seoul, Mrs. Sellner’s prophecy made the headlines of newspapers around the globe.

* * *

Inside that same gate, Jinwoo gasped as he glanced down at the crowd below him. It seemed like the whole world had gathered to stare.

“Oh.....!”

How touching would it be if those people were there to hail his return? Jinwoo smiled bitterly, since he fully knew that that was not the case.

Soon the gate would open. Though a subject of fear for civilians who didn’t know better, it was a way back home for Jinwoo.

Home. He couldn’t wait to get back.

Hey, is this the first time I’ve looked through a gate from the inside?

The gate was transparent, which allowed him to watch people gathering beneath his feet. He placed his hand on the barrier separating them. He’d slammed into similar gates at full strength in order to reach the top and battle the Dragon King.

Now.....

Jinwoo merely had to give it a little push to crack the wall. It’d be a piece of cake to break through the membrane effortlessly. For a moment, he debated just breaking it and making his way down there, but he shook his head and smiled.

.....I shouldn’t.

The people behind him were scared enough. There was no need to frighten them further. Besides, Jinwoo had been waiting for this moment for almost thirty years, so there was no reason he couldn't wait a few more days.

As he took his hand off the barrier, something caught his eye.

Wait a minute. These are definitely not the hands of a ninth grader.

His hands were way too big for a teenage boy. Jinwoo had grown to be a middle-aged man during the whopping twenty-seven years in the gap between dimensions. Physically, he was already older than his father. However, only two years had passed since his disappearance in the outside world. He needed to adjust his physical appearance so the people in his life wouldn't freak out at his abrupt change.

It had absolutely nothing to do with him wanting to look younger.....right?

"I guess I have no choice."

He looked down at his body with a smile and activated his powers. Now that he was able to use the power of the Shadow Monarch effortlessly, old age, sickness, life, and death all bent to his will. Jinwoo quickly transformed into a middle school student.

Shooooom.....

The bearded middle-aged man turned into that of a boy with a bright face. As the black smoke around him dissipated, his clothes were transformed into the school uniform he had been wearing when he left home.

That's good enough, right?

To others, he looked just like any other student. He was ready both physically and mentally to go home and see his family. The only thing he needed to do now was wait.

Two more days.....

Because there was finally a definitive end to his journey, Jinwoo even found waiting for the gate to open an enjoyable time.

* * *

"H-huh.....? Look! It's opening!"

“The hole is opening!”

People screamed and pointed at the gate.

Ahhhh!

Eek!

The gate opened to reveal.....nothing.

“.....?”

“What’s going on?”

“Is that it?”

People had gathered from all over the world in order to observe the gate. They were abuzz as the gate began to disappear.

Meanwhile, on a quiet street, Jinwoo deactivated Stealth. No one paid any attention to the middle school kid who suddenly appeared, because their attention was solely on the vanishing gate.

After watching the spectators for a bit, Jinwoo turned to head home and spotted a young man holding an expensive-looking bouquet of flowers.

The man smiled. “Welcome back, Mr. Jinwoo Sung. Or should I call you the Shadow Monarch?”

Jinwoo had never seen the young man before, but he didn’t sense any hostility from him.

“It doesn’t matter what you call me.” Jinwoo snorted as he accepted the bouquet. “It’s nice to have at least one person welcoming me back.”

He gave the bouquet a sniff and then raised his head.

The man sounded surprised. “To be honest.....I never thought that you would succeed in getting rid of all of them. But I can feel the weight of ten million soldiers in your footsteps.”

The Monarchs’ armies had been defeated, and denizens of Chaos were now shadow soldiers. Jinwoo was officially the most powerful being among both the Monarchs and Rulers.

Jinwoo lowered the bouquet. “I don’t think you’re here to just give me flowers..... What do the Rulers want from me?”

Despite his firm tone, Jinwoo looked quite relaxed, for a lion need not fear a lamb. Despite the young man having already known what he was getting into, the overwhelming power that was sharply honed by the war still sent shivers up his spine.

A lamb could only fear its opponent. Before the majestic lion of a Monarch, the man politely lowered his head.

“I bring a message from the Rulers, sir. It is rather long, so shall we go elsewhere?”

“Sure.” Jinwoo led the way with a grin. “I just remembered a stop I wanted to make anyway.”

* * *

“.....” The young man glanced down at the ice cream in front of him. “You wanted to get ice cream?”

Just because Jinwoo’s appearance had changed didn’t mean his tastes had, either, but.....

“If you’re secluded anywhere long enough, you develop a craving for something sweet.”

Jinwoo dug in with relish. The cold, sweet dessert stimulated the tip of his tongue. It finally sank in that he was home again.

Jinwoo polished off his ice cream before letting the young man speak. “So what do the Rulers want?”

The man, who had watched the Shadow Monarch’s snack time in a daze, collected himself and spoke hurriedly. “Right. First, I would like to express our deepest—”

“Let’s skip the small talk.”

The Rulers had sent their envoy to a world they had no business in, so Jinwoo wanted to cut to the chase.

“Did something happen?”

“No, it’s not like that. Rather, I came to see you because all the problems have been resolved.”

Because everything had been resolved? The man swallowed nervously as Jinwoo’s eyes narrowed. But the envoy had a job to do regardless of his fear.

He opened his mouth with difficulty. “The Rulers are...concerned about how your power will affect this world, sir. As you know, the power you possess is too great for this world to bear.”

“.....So?”

“A world without mana is fragile. With your cooperation, we would like to transfer you to a place that can handle your power.”

“Why bother when you can simply seal me in?”

“Yes, that is one solution—”

Bam!

Jinwoo slammed his palm down, startling the smile off the young man’s face, and lowered his voice.

“They want to get rid of me because they’re done with me, is that it? Because they fear my power?”

Jinwoo was still smiling, but his eyes were cold.

Startled, the young man urgently waved his hand. “No, not at all!”

He handed Jinwoo a newspaper he had brought with him. Jinwoo observed the article on the first page. There was a photo of a familiar face. It was about a prophecy from Norma Sellner, the woman who had been called the Upgrader in his previous life.

“The god of death will soon descend on this land!”

Jinwoo’s brow twitched at the words *god of death*.

“She wasn’t this accurate in the previous timeline, but contact with our world has changed her.”

Jinwoo’s eyes stopped on a part of the article about Mrs. Sellner’s spiritual eyes opening two years ago. It couldn’t be a coincidence that two years ago had

been the point in time the Cup of Reincarnation sent them back to.

“Are you saying my existence can trigger this kind of change?”

“That is correct.” As Jinwoo calmed down, the young man breathed a small sigh of relief. “The Rulers are willing to provide you a safe place to prevent these kinds of changes if you so desire.”

“.....” Jinwoo leaned back in his chair. He still couldn’t detect any hostility from this man. He and the Rulers meant well.

However, Jinwoo couldn’t believe he was hearing this on his first day back home. He had been so excited to return, so he couldn’t hide his disappointment. He didn’t want to talk about this now, and he made it clear.

“Could you come back another time?”

“.....Of course, great Monarch.”

The envoy politely said his good-bye to the greatest hero who had ended the war between the Monarchs and the Rulers. Then he got up, leaving behind only a pure-black business card so Jinwoo could presumably contact him once he’d made his decision.

Jinwoo inspected both sides of the card before tucking it into his pocket with a wry smile. His mind raced, but the anticipation of returning disappeared like bubbles.

If every living creature has a purpose.....

Jinwoo was sure about one thing. He had fulfilled his purpose in saving the world from strange phenomena and the attack of the Monarchs. But his power was no longer of any use, and it was hard to dispose of, much like nuclear energy.

One question remained.

Have I become redundant?

Just as he was having trouble sorting out his thoughts, he spotted a familiar face passing by the ice-cream store. Before he realized it, Jinwoo had opened the door and stepped outside as if he was being compelled.

He would always have these moments wondering if he, the Shadow Monarch, should remain here. However.....

As long as I still have a reason to stay.....

A girl in a track suit stopped in the middle of her run and looked back as she picked up a wonderful scent. It seemed to be coming from an ice-cream store where a boy stood in the doorway, staring at her.

Hmm? Did ice cream always smell this good?

The girl shrugged and continued on her run.

Jinwoo couldn't stop his grin as he watched the girl get farther and farther away.

There were still people whom he loved in this world. And there were people who loved him, now and before.

That was enough reason for him to stay.

4.

The first time I met him was inside the strange space my king had created. My mission was to test whoever entered the place. My king told me that he wanted to see if the human was good enough to be his vessel.

Somehow, I knew that this would be the last order he would ever give me. After all, my king had lost interest in the war ever since he absolved the Rulers, so there had to be a reason why he was showing such interest in this insignificant human.

I surmised that my king was about to bid me farewell, but his order was absolute. I could neither question nor stop him. I had no choice but to follow his orders, for that was all I could do.

After having most of my power sealed, I was made to stand alone in the strange space to put the human to the test.

The inhabitants of this world call this space a dungeon, do they not?

The dungeon simulated the look of a throne room of a castle, and deep inside this fake dungeon sat a tall throne. As I looked around, I tried to search my now-hazy memories from when I was a human.

Indeed..... The Architect has created such a sophisticated stage using my king's power.

I ran my hands along the thick columns that lined both sides of an aisle leading from the entrance all the way to the platform where the throne was. I was amazed by the Architect's craftsmanship. The attention to detail likely helped the human accept my king's power.

Just then, I sensed a presence.

Already.....?

In a panic, I inadvertently sat on the throne as I felt something drawing near, much quicker than I had anticipated.

"....."

After gathering myself, I wondered if I was being arrogant by sitting on the throne. My king's consciousness remained within the human I was about to test, so I was self-conscious about being disrespectful.

.....

In the end, I decided to refrain from displaying any rudeness and hurriedly hid behind the closest column.

Creeeeeeeak!

The door opened then as if on cue, and the human didn't see me panicking because of the surrounding darkness. Thankfully, my mistake hadn't spoiled my master's plans. I breathed a sigh of relief. Then, when the human was about ten steps away from me, I slowly walked out from behind the pillar and blocked his way.

.....!

It was a young man. His nervousness was palpable in the silent room. Of course, I did not look upon him favorably.

So he is the one my lord has chosen.....

Even if this weren't my last mission, I would have had no intention of holding back. If the human wasn't up to snuff, he would die by my hands. But as my fighting spirit flared up, the man suddenly raised his tightly clenched fists at me.

.....?

Does he intend to defeat me with his bare hands? For a moment, I considered him quite brave for a human. I took off my cape and dropped my weapons to the ground to level the playing field.

.....!

Why did he seem surprised by every move I made? I admired the determination in his eyes, but did he have the skills to back it up? We'd see about that.....

The result was immediate.

"Argh!"

Thud!

Though I hadn't used my full strength, I brought him to his knees. That was disappointing, though I had to admit, I was also relieved. This man's disqualification meant that my king would stick around a little longer. For the first time, I was relieved by my king's failure.

I decided to give a fitting end to the human, matching the level of bravery he had displayed. I summoned the sword I had cast aside from the other side of the room using the power my king had briefly bestowed upon me. I meant to cut off the human's head to kill him painlessly. I thought that would be the most merciful thing I could do for him. As if he'd read my mind, the man obediently put his head down.

Excellent choice. He is as wise as he is brave..... It's unfortunate that killing him is the only way to deter my lord.

I moved to behead the man who had chosen an honorable death. However, at that very moment, his eyes shifted from their meek demeanor.

Klang!

He blocked my sword with his hand and thrust his dagger into my face.

Shhk!

Aaaaargh!

I was shocked, not because he had blocked my sword but rather by the fact that he hadn't given up even in such a situation. And I had realized belatedly that his eyes had briefly resembled those of my master.

I see. So this is why my lord.....

I had let my guard down and was unable to deal with the man's continuous attacks. Eventually, I was thrown into the wall.

Wham!

He stabbed at me relentlessly.

Klang! Klang! Klang! Klang! Klang! Klang!

The armor protecting my neck was compromised by his attacks and broke.

Crack!

It was his strength versus mine. Since I was the one testing him, I was likely a few levels stronger than he was. However, it was my loss. Had I underestimated the human? Or had his determination pulled off some kind of miracle?

Through my bleary eyes, I saw the man pump his hands in the air in celebration.

"Whooo!"

Strangely, I let out a laugh when I saw him like that. Perhaps I had lost my mind. My gaze moved toward the ceiling as I began to black out. I couldn't see what these impossibly tall columns were holding up because it was too dark. It was like a physical representation of the distance between my king and me, which saddened me.

I'm not sure whether I should be happy that my master was right or sad that I've failed to change his mind.....

I passed out before I could reach a conclusion.

That was, until he approached me and bade me to rise.

* * *

He cared for me. It was probably because I was one of his first soldiers. I was grateful for his frequent acts of kindness. Of the ones that stood out to me..... Oh yes, there was that one time he said to me.....

“You’ll be able to talk to me once you level up, right?”

How could I describe the overwhelming emotion I felt seeing his bright smile?

I wasn’t sure how he regarded me, but to me, he was my master, friend, and comrade. He and I were in numerous battles together. We went up against magic beasts, monsters, and even hunters. When he was happy, I was happy. When he was struggling, I struggled alongside him. When he was sad, so was I. I gradually accepted the new Monarch even though I knew that I would grow less attached to my previous master as my loyalty to my new master deepened.

Of course, it wasn’t always easy. There were several challenging times.

“Use this.”

There was one instance where I had to fight a female hunter while I had many restrictions forced upon me, and the only weapon I could use was a sword that could shoot lightning. She overpowered me.

“Was that black knight really your strongest?”

.....

I was humiliated.

I also got a shadow soldier who was abnormally strong as an unexpected roommate.

Skraaaaaah!

.....

This roommate was very true to his nature, but his nature happened to be extremely ferocious. It made me sorely miss my previous genteel comrades.

That was why I honestly felt a bit better seeing Bellion taking Beru down. Just a little. But the joy of reuniting with an old friend didn’t last long. Soon, Beru

began to influence Bellion as well.

“Hey, this black flag..... Do you think our king would appreciate it if we hoisted it to the top of the castle?”

“.....Are you serious?”

“I may not be as good at building like the ants, but I will do whatever it takes to make him happy.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.....”

“Ooooh, is that flag for our liege?”

“.....Really?”

We do not need to get into my king’s reaction.

In any case, his combat power increased after absorbing the original shadow army that had been awaiting his call in the gap between dimensions. And despite my concerns, he treated the previous Shadow Monarch’s soldiers the same as his own, and our united forces resolved to rush headlong into any battle for him.

Training passed in the blink of an eye, and our determination was soon put to the test in a war against the Monarchs. We fought with everything we had, and our king led us to victory.

When he clashed with the Dragon King, we all watched the decisive battle from the shadows. The battle between the two of them was so moving, I was overcome with emotion.

“Skree! Whoa, are you crying, Igris?”

“.....Be quiet.”

During one particularly dire moment, the entire shadow army went into a frenzy in our king’s shadow. But at that moment, the Rulers opened a door in the sky and their army came pouring through.

Raaaaah!

We cheered as we watched the reinforcements raining down from above.

“You couldn’t come any faster?!”

“I bet they arrived at the last minute just to make us anxious.”

“If I was out there, I’d have tried to smack some sense into them.”

Regardless of our complaints about the Rulers’ army, we were exchanging hugs in happiness over our king’s victory. However, our joy didn’t last long.

Our king spoke. “One more time... Could you use the Cup of Reincarnation one more time?”

He told the Rulers that he wanted to reverse time in order to delete every trace of them and the Monarchs from the world he was living in. I had people I wanted to save when I was human, so I understood where he was coming from. I would probably make the same choice if I was in his shoes, so I respected his decision.

My fellow soldiers and I were ready to collide with not only the Monarchs, but any army for our king’s sake.

However, not everyone was invited to the battle. Some of us would vanish when the forbidden tool was used. Those soldiers dropped to their knees, wailing. I tried to console Iron, who had been with us for so long, Greed who suffered at the receiving end of our king’s ire since his rebirth, as well as the other soldiers who were grieving.

Once we bade farewell, we went back to the past and were thrust into a new war. Our king’s skills grew and grew, and we became more powerful in turn. We dealt with several predicaments big and small, but with each crisis he overcame, he grew stronger.

That went on for almost thirty years. Having crushed all our other enemies, the army of destruction was the only one left standing in our way.

As the fight commenced between our king and the Dragon King, we faced off against the ancient dragons.

One of the ancient dragons, Granode, spoke to me as I tore through the draconic army.

“Igris! You, who used to be one of two wings in the shadow army, now follow the new human Monarch. Have you no shame?”

Granode, who had already reverted to his human form because he didn't have enough energy to keep the shape of a dragon, panted as he gripped the sword plunged into his chest. I looked down at him in a daze.

He was right. I had completely forgotten about the previous Shadow Monarch because the time I had spent with my new master had been so glorious. How long had it been since I completely stopped thinking about the previous Monarch?

Although Granode was dead and the battle raged on all around me, I was rooted to the spot for quite some time. My previous master had once been my entire world, but had my judgment become clouded somewhere along the way? My mind went blank as a wave of doubt washed over me.

But at that moment, from elsewhere, I heard a call that brought me back to my senses.

"Igris!"

It was my king's voice.

I hurriedly looked up to see a bright flash.

The Breath of Destruction!

Having used up much of his power battling the Shadow Monarch, the Dragon King had reverted to a human form. He blew fire my way. No, he was not likely aiming for me. I was simply standing in the crossfire. How unlucky of me. But many died from being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was my turn.

Kra-kooooom!

I knew that by the time I saw the light, it was already too late. I froze in my tracks in surrender. As I was blinded by the light, I was struck with the possibility that this might perhaps be my punishment for forgetting about the previous Shadow Monarch to whom I had sworn my loyalty. If so, I gladly accepted this price for my sin.

But as I quietly awaited my last moment, someone stepped in front of me and blocked the Breath of Destruction with one hand.

Kroooooom!

The Dragon King's fiery attack was burning someone's left hand, but they made no move to take their hand away. I gasped at the one blocking flames that could incinerate everything for my sake.

"My lord!"

When the Breath of Destruction abated, he rebuked me with his eyes.

.....!

I snapped back to my senses just as I had when he called out my name. My lord looked at me briefly before charging at the Dragon King once more. I raised my sword to fight the dragonfolk encroaching on me.

Klang!

Sparks flew as sword clashed with sword. The dragonfolk I had cut down cried out.

That's right. I never forgot about the previous Shadow Monarch. It was simply that my feelings for him extended to my current master. I was completely loyal to the successor the previous Shadow Monarch had chosen. How could that be wrong?

I was a knight, my king's sword. I was one of the two wings of the shadow army. If the time came to take my leave of the current Monarch, I would tell him what I never had the chance to say to the previous monarch.

It was an honor to fight under your command.

"Raaaaaaaah!" With a mighty shout, I charged at the dragons coming at me.

* * *

With the war ended, we safely returned to my king's world.

He was currently studying hard into the night. From the shadows, I could see what he saw.

"My lord, the answer for question fourteen is B, not A."

"Oh, really? Thanks."

The master had been expelled from his middle school because he had missed so many days. Now, he was engaged in a new battle called a "qualification

exam.” Even though he got near-perfect scores in mock tests, he would periodically lose focus and make a mistake.

Who would assist him then? Grand Marshal Bellion, who was more muscle than brain? Or Marshal Beru who, despite his intelligence, was still a bug?

When I was a human, I graduated knight school with excellent grades, so if I didn’t assist my master—

“Um, you sure about that, Igris? It says the answer for question fourteen is..... A,” my king quipped as he consulted the answer sheet.

As a knight, I accepted my error. “It appears as though my training was lacking. I shall try even harder for you, my lord.”

.....

I am my king’s knight. I am my king’s sword. My king’s battlefield is also mine. Since my master has entered a new battlefield, my glory days go on.

5.

Jinchul sometimes felt a sense of loss, like he had forgotten something important. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t put a finger on it, but the longer he dwelled on it, the more the hole in his heart seemed to grow.

“So what are you thinking so hard about?” the rookie detective asked Jinchul as he handed him a cup of hot coffee from the vending machine.

“Thanks.” Jinchul took it and shrugged as if nothing was bothering him.

The aroma of coffee seemed to shrink the hole in his heart.

Jinchul Woo was in his fourth year as a detective in the violent crimes investigation unit. He was never the sentimental type, but this feeling of loss started to plague him three years ago and came back every so often. Anytime he shared this with someone, they’d only nag him that it was because he still didn’t have a family of his own, despite his age.

Jinchul gave a bitter smile and downed his coffee in one go.

.....*That's right.*

Didn't people say a busy bee doesn't have time to be sad? The best way to get over feeling blue or green or whatever was to work hard.

As Jinchul entered the office, he saw the backs of three men sitting next to one another. He crumpled his paper cup and pointed to the men with his chin.

"Who are they?"

"Oh, them? Well, uh....."

When the rookie detective hesitated, Jinchul quickly walked over and stood in front of the men. Their faces were pale as if they had seen something they shouldn't have, shaking like leaves on a tree and unable to make eye contact with anyone.

Jinchul muttered, "It's the shadow monster again....."

* * *

It was common enough for criminals to show up at a police station and confess their crimes out of a sense of guilt or fear of getting caught. However, it was certainly rare for criminals to show up scared out of their wits and beg to be jailed right away. Yet this had been happening repeatedly for several months.

"The sh-shadow..... It suddenly rose up from the ground and spoke to me. It said I would regret being alive if I didn't turn myself in within twenty-four hours..... It's all my fault, D-D-Detective. Please throw me in the slammer!"

Every single one of their stories was the same. Eventually, the suspicious powers-that-be demanded an investigation.

Jinchul raised his voice. "So you're saying you all saw this shadow monster?"

"Th-that's right!"

Jinchul, who was taking their statements, sighed as he wrote down the reason for turning themselves in.

How am I supposed to submit this?

The thought of reporting on some shadow monster story and a twenty-four-

hour curse gave him a headache.

Tap, tap.

Jinchul looked over his shoulder as a senior detective said, “Jinchul, let the rookie write this up. Come to the conference room.”

Conference room?

Violent crimes had gone down due to this shadow monster’s brilliant performance, and now a sudden meeting? What could this be about?

The senior detective went on ahead, leaving behind a puzzled Jinchul, who raised an eyebrow as he got up from his chair.

“I’ll take it from here, Detective Woo.”

“Great, thanks.” He left the rookie behind with some words of encouragement before joining the other detectives in the meeting room.

* * *

“What? You want to let those crooks go?”

“Hey! Lower your voice. People can hear you.”

Incredulous, Jinchul asked again. “What do you mean you want to release them?”

“We’re not releasing them per se. We’re putting them under surveillance to see what will happen to them after twenty-four hours.”

One of Jinchul’s colleagues frowned. “Sir, they’re just talking nonsense because they’re strung out on something. This monster is probably a hallucinogenic side effect of some drug.”

“Their drug tests came back negative. I went to Forensics myself to confirm the results.”

“But that’s—”

“Do you really think a drug could make all those unrelated criminals see the exact same thing, one that would cause them to turn themselves in?”

“.....” Jinchul’s colleague had nothing to say to that.

The senior detective continued. “The higher-ups have been asking for answers, but we still have nothing. Anyone have a better idea? We should at least be able to pick up some clues this way.”

Though the other detectives didn’t look too impressed with the plan at first, they exchanged glances and nodded. If everyone had indeed seen the same apparition, this might give them some good leads.

“So let them talk their nonsense, and let’s see what happens.”

Jinchul had been quietly listening but finally opened his mouth. “But what if something happens to them? Then what?”

“.....?”

“.....?”

The detectives collectively turned to look at him and broke out into grins.

“Detective Woo, do you actually believe in ghosts and stuff?”

“I never knew you were so superstitious, Jinchul.”

“Ha-ha-ha!”

It wasn’t that Jinchul believed that there was a monster, but there had to be a reason the criminals had seen the same apparition, right? Their testimonies made Jinchul uneasy, as if he was staring into the eyes of something hidden in the darkness, and he had a hunch that they shouldn’t trouble it.

The chief detective misunderstood Jinchul’s worried expression and patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Detective Woo. No harm will come to them. We’ll take just one of them to a quiet place like a warehouse and simply observe. He’ll be properly guarded by several of our strongest detectives so he can’t escape.”

His boss looked at him as if asking whether Jinchul really believed in monsters or ghosts, so Jinchul had no choice but to nod.

His boss chuckled. “Anyway, let’s say a monster appears and does something to the criminals after twenty-four hours! Shouldn’t we thank it?”

The three men were vicious criminals who had broken into the home of an

elderly couple to rob them, beating them to death when they fought back. The chief said half-jokingly, half-seriously, that it would be better for these crooks to be ripped apart by a monster instead of being sent to jail where they'd be provided three warm meals a day.

"Then I need volunteers....." The chief gave a sly grin. "Detective Woo, you can sit this one out if you like."

"....." Jinchul hesitated, but he could read between the lines. The chief clearly meant for Jinchul to take part.

"No, I'm in."

* * *

"D-Detectives! Please, you can't do this to me! I'll die!"

"Be quiet. We just need to check something."

"But I'm gonna get killed!"

"Hey, no one's dying today. We'll be right here to guard you. Detective Kim, how long until the twenty-four-hour mark?"

"Let's see..... Looks like there's half an hour left."

"Really? Wow, it's cold out."

Although it was already spring, there was still a chill in the air, and the detectives could see their breath. It was dawn, and since nothing was happening to the criminal they were watching in the warehouse, they were pretty bored.

But one person among them, Jinchul Woo, remained alert as they kept watch.

Something's not right.....

He felt a shift in the air, like something they needed to avoid was approaching them. Hoping that he was worried about nothing, he took some deep breaths to calm down.

Soon, it reached the deadline set by the so-called shadow monster.

"And.....time."

"Really?"

One of the detectives checked his watch as he got to his feet.

Tick, tock.

Time was up.

“.....”

“.....”

It was just as they'd expected. Nothing had happened, and it didn't look like anything was going to happen.

“The hell?”

A quick-tempered detective glared at the trembling criminal, who peeked his head up, looking bewildered.

“Huh.....?”

With no witnesses around, the detectives surrounded the crook and yelled at him.

“Were all of you on drugs?!”

“Why don't you make this easier for us and 'fess up already?”

The criminal looked around, but when nothing happened for some time, he seemed very confused.

“No, I mean..... We really saw it. Actually, there were four of us and—”

Jinchul, who had stood to the side and kept his guard up, suddenly turned and desperately yelled at the others. “Get out! Get out of there!”

What was Jinchul talking about? The detectives looked at Jinchul when something forcefully pushed them backward.

“Ahhh!”

“Argh!”

They tumbled on the ground a few times, knocked out cold. Jinchul was about to run toward them but suddenly stopped in his tracks.

There, in front of him, were monsters rising slowly from the shadows.

“Oh.....”

He couldn't speak or even breathe properly. The creatures weren't human but resembled humans with ant heads. Jinchul's eyes widened.

There are three of them!

They weren't hallucinations or side effects of drugs. The criminals' testimonies were 100 percent true.

“Aaaaaaah!” The criminal screamed as the ants surrounded him.

It was the most desperate scream a human could make, one that came out in the face of death.

The ants didn't waste any time in ripping off the man's limbs and eating them.

“Gaaaah!”

The scream didn't last long. All that was left of the ants' feast was a little bit of blood and some tiny pieces of flesh.

Jinchul felt like his spirit had left his body as he watched the scene unfold in a daze. Two of the ants spotted him after finishing their meal.

Skraaah.

Their eyes were fixed on Jinchul, who tried to run away but found his legs wouldn't move. His feet were glued to the floor.

“P-please.....”

Just then, the larger ant with wings grabbed the other two by the shoulders and stopped them from going after Jinchul. The detective could've sworn the ant looked almost happy to see him, breaking into a grin.

“.....?”

A smiling ant? No, never mind that. How did Jinchul know that the ant was happy to see him? Jinchul had a weird sense of longing amid this awfully scary and frightful situation. It felt like déjà vu.

Why.....? How is that possible?

The bewildered detective saw the ants sink into the shadows.

“H-hey! Wait!”

They ignored his calls and disappeared in an instant. By the time Jinchul reached the shadows, there was no trace of the ants. He ran his hand over the spot as he felt the emptiness in his heart more prominently than ever.

“Hmm.....”

Jinchul returned to his senses when he heard his colleagues stir.

“Are you guys okay?”

After checking on them, he urgently called for help. But even when the ambulance arrived and took his colleagues away, he couldn’t keep his eyes off the shadows the ants had vanished into.

* * *

“That’s great! That’s fan-fucking-tastic!” The chief was furious, which was understandable.

The criminal had gone missing, and the detectives assigned to guard him couldn’t remember a thing because they’d been knocked out. The chief clicked his tongue at the two detectives lowering their bandaged heads. Then he turned toward Jinchul.

“How about you, Detective Woo?”

“.....”

“You called the ambulance, right? Don’t you remember anything?”

“I’m sorry. When I came to, they were still unconscious, so.....”

“My God!” The chief sighed as he beat his chest in frustration. “Luckily, the report hasn’t reached upstairs yet, so you need to be quiet about all of this. You two were injured while investigating gangs in Guro-gu. Got that?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, Chief.”

And with that, the matter was closed. For a time, it was uneventful for the violent crimes investigation unit.

“Detective Woo, you seem to be in high spirits these days. Did something

good happen?" The rookie detective handed Jinchul some hot vending machine coffee.

"Nothing in particular." Jinchul took it and shrugged nonchalantly.

But the rookie detective was on to something. Seeing those ant monsters had filled a tiny part of the constant emptiness that had been gnawing at him.

There's something to this.

His veteran detective's intuition, as well as common sense, told him that this was definitely something worth investigating. As Jinchul quietly studied his notepad, the rookie detective peeked over Jinchul's shoulder.

"Huh? What? You're still investigating the incident regarding that missing criminal? But the chief said—"

"I know. I'm just looking into it for personal reasons."

Jinchul cut him off and finished the rest of his coffee. But the rookie detective wasn't done talking.

"Wow..... So it's not just our jurisdiction, but criminals from other areas have also confessed because of the shadow thing?"

"....."

Jinchul couldn't be too hard on this rookie detective, since he had voluntarily joined the violent crimes investigation unit at a time when fewer and fewer people wanted the job. Although he was annoyed by him, Jinchul answered his questions with as much patience as he could muster.

"That's what it looks like."

"Hmm." The rookie studied the contents of the notepad. "Looks like the number of criminals turning themselves in dropped a lot between the end of February and the beginning of March."

Jinchul's eyes widened at the rookie detective's keen observation. "Did something come to mind?"

"Oh, it's nothing. It's just, my aunt used to own a small book-rental place a while back."

“.....And?”

“Well, she used to complain that business would slow from the end of February to the beginning of March, between the end and start of the school year. Ha-ha. That doesn’t mean anything, though, right?”

The rookie detective laughed in embarrassment, but he was surprised to see Jinchul writing down what he’d just said.

“D-Detective Woo?”

“Just in case.”

The end and start of the school year. Jinchul quietly added these eight simple words to his notes.

* * *

A day before the entrance ceremony at XX High School for incoming freshmen, the principal secretly called the teacher who oversaw student affairs to his office.

“There’s a troublemaker among the new students.”

“Pardon?”

The principal pushed a document toward the teacher, who scanned it and blinked in confusion.

“His father is a firefighter, and his mother is a stay-at-home mom. His grades are pretty good, too. He doesn’t seem like a troublemaker.”

“No, not that! Keep reading.”

“.....!”

In his first year of middle school, the student had run away for two years, which naturally spelled expulsion from his middle school. But this student had completed self-study and passed the test to register for this high school.

He decided to run away as a kid fresh out of elementary school?

The teacher sensed the coming of a powerful adversary and narrowed his eyes.

The principal lowered his voice. “What do you think? Can you handle this

student?”

The teacher closed the troublemaker’s file and took a deep breath. “You know why they call me the Venomous Snake, don’t you, sir? Please leave the troublemakers to me. I’ll be sure to whip him into shape.”

The teacher’s eyes sparkled with confidence and a sense of duty.

The principal nodded. “Very good. I’ll leave it to you, Mr. Park.”

The principal’s expression softened after hearing Mr. Park’s pledge. In turn, Mr. Park grinned.

Tomorrow would be the fated battle. Mr. Park’s heart was already beating with the determination to break the troublemaker’s rebellious spirit from the get-go.

* * *

The high school freshmen gathered on the field for the entrance ceremony. They took advantage of the lax teachers watching them to find and chat with their friends from the same middle school.

“Quiet!” Kisul Park, the Venomous Snake, appeared like a shark invading a school of guppies. His glare shut the freshmen up quick. “Who’s making all that racket, hmm?”

Though one would think from his name that he’d be an art or technology teacher, Kisul was actually a gym teacher. He had cauliflower ears, a thick neck, broad shoulders, and large thighs befitting a man who specialized in wrestling.

Students lowered their heads to avoid his gaze. There may be power struggles between students at the start of the school year, but the ones between teachers and students were arguably more important, as they would set how a class or even a whole grade would behave.

The Venomous Snake had never lost in a power struggle against students, even during his first year as a teacher ten years ago, and he had no intention of losing this year.

The school of guppies averted their eyes in front of the shark, going dead silent as he walked by.

His colleagues admired him as they watched him in his element.

“Mr. Park is in fine form.....”

“It looks like it will be another smooth ride if we trust in Mr. Park.”

Kisul smiled with satisfaction as he scanned the timid freshmen.

Yes, this is how it's supposed to be.

However, he wasn't satisfied with just this. Today, he had a specific target to hit as assigned to him by the principal himself. If Kisul didn't break the troublemaker's rebellious sprit today, he couldn't say that he did his job.

He soon found the troublemaker within the crowd.

There he is.

The smile disappeared from his face when he spotted his target. The troublemaker was much taller than his peers, obviously muscular, with bright eyes. Even at a distance, Kisul could tell this was no ordinary troublemaker.

So that's Jinwoo Sung.....

However, Kisul was a pro. Regardless of how disruptive the students were, they were as gentle as lambs before him. And if they tried to put on a display of arrogance, Kisul would just have to show a little bit of his true self. The Venomous Snake had yet to meet a troublemaker he couldn't break. He oozed with self-confidence.

Okay then.....

It was time to begin. First, Kisul scanned the troublemaker from top to bottom. Suddenly, his eyes locked on to something.

That's it!

The troublemaker was wearing a black glove on one hand. Wearing gloves or hats was against the dress code, and as the teacher in charge of student affairs, Kisul couldn't ignore anyone breaking these rules, could he?

Of course, Kisul knew that the student had to wear a glove because he had a severe burn on his hand, since it was in the student's file. Kisul merely needed the slightest excuse to break the troublemaker. Pointing out the violation of the

school's dress code was the perfect excuse to scold him. As he approached the troublemaker, Kisul's eyes lit up like a snake that had cornered its prey.

The troublemaker didn't seem to have noticed his approach yet, which was good. A sneak attack was an effective way to break an enemy's spirit. When Kisul was close enough for the student to hear his name being whispered, he opened his eyes wide and got to work.

"Hey, you! How dare you wear that glove—"

Jinwoo looked up at Kisul's loud roar and made eye contact.

"H-huh.....?"

That's when Kisul saw countless monsters standing behind the troublemaker. The students on the field faded from view, and he saw an army of ten million soldiers standing at perfect attention, stretching all the way to the horizon.

"Oh!" Kisul fell backward, screaming.

"Mr. Park!"

"Are you all right, Mr. Park?"

The teachers nearby rushed to help him as the blood drained from his face.

When he looked back at Jinwoo, everything had returned to normal.

"H-how.....?" He blinked furiously and shook his head hard.

The students stared at him and muttered to one another.

"Everyone, be quiet!"

"Mr. Park, are you sick or something?"

Kisul's face turned red as his colleagues looked at him with concern and students with confusion.

"I-I'm fine." Kisul shook off their hands as they tried to help him and quickly left.

Bellion quietly watched him go and whispered to Jinwoo from within his shadow.

"My lord, that man....."

Yeah, I think he saw you guys.

Jinwoo nodded.

Some people had much better perception than others. On rare occasions, they would discover that Jinwoo was different from the average person, just like Kisul had.

.....Is this one of the side effects of my influence on this world?

There was no way to tell. He bit his lip as he thought of the pale face of the teacher who had hastily left.

At that moment, an announcement came from a staticky speaker on the field.

“The principal will now deliver his welcome speech to the new students.”

Jinwoo turned away from the direction Kisul had run off to.

It was a lovely spring day. Under the warm sun, both the principal's bald head and the hearts of the freshmen class shone brightly.

* * *

For certain reasons, Jinwoo had purposely registered at a high school that was a little farther from his home. Because of that, he didn't know anyone in his class.

Well, I guess that was to be expected.....

He didn't regret his decision as he scanned his classmates' faces and grinned. He was too old to get anxious about not knowing anyone in his class. In the past, his younger self would've greeted some of the kids no matter how awkward it felt, but he couldn't be bothered to do so.

While his classmates made the effort to get to know one another, Jinwoo just opened the book he had brought. Perhaps because he'd spent so long in the silence in the gap between dimensions, he found that he enjoyed reading, as it afforded him the same quiet and solitude.

Besides, he was technically several decades older than these kids, and he had no idea what to talk to them about. He would rather see what books had to tell him.

As he tried to enjoy his quiet time, someone approached him.

“Um, are you.....?”

It was a meek voice. The teenager flinched when Jinwoo looked up, but he seemed to recognize him.

“From △△ Middle School..... You’re Jinwoo Sung, right?”

Who was he again? Jinwoo squinted at him.

He looks familiar.....

He probably wasn’t someone Jinwoo had been that close to, as he had a hard time remembering his name or how they had known each other.

“Ah, yeah.....” As if he was used to being in this position, the meek teenager went ahead and introduced himself. “I’m Younggil Oh..... We were in the same class in middle school.”

“Ah, okay.”

As soon as he heard his name, Jinwoo remembered him as the kid who looked on with envy at the other boys when they talked about going to the Internet café. That boy with the buzz cut was now a high school student. Jinwoo extended his arm for a handshake with a mixed expression of happiness and wonder.

“Nice to see you, Younggil.”

“Yeah.....” Younggil hesitated as if he wasn’t used to shaking hands as a high school student. He shyly grabbed Jinwoo’s hand. “I-it’s good to see you too.....”

Jinwoo detected a strong sense of relief transmitting from the handshake. Seeing a familiar face in a new classroom at a new school was certainly a relief. Jinwoo smiled to help his old friend relax further. It seemed to work, as Younggil slowly began to get chatty.

“Do you live around here? I moved to the area last year, so—”

Jinwoo interrupted him and cut the reunion short. “Hang on.”

He turned to the four shady-looking kids gathering around him and Younggil.

“Who are you supposed to be? And what’s with the glove?” The gang of four

laughed and pointed at the glove covering Jinwoo's left hand.

Seeing these troublemakers made Younggil's face fall.

Younggil needs to man up.....

Jinwoo felt bad for his friend. He looked over the four bullies and noted the nasty expression and glint in their eyes.

Though this was the first time they were in the same school, these kids had been causing trouble together ever since their middle school days. After scoping out the rest of their class, they figured Jinwoo would be the only one who could stand up to them, so they decided to size him up.

Their other classmates might have trouble looking them in the eye, but to a seasoned fighter who spent the last thirty years in combat, they seemed..... cute.

The bullies had no way of knowing how little Jinwoo thought of them and kept provoking him.

"Hey, take that glove off. I wanna try it on."

"Why do you only have one? You trying to be some kind of edgelord?"

"I bet you think you're some anime protagonist!"

Ha-ha-ha!

Seeing the four of them burst out laughing, Jinwoo chuckled, which triggered a shift in their demeanor.

"Something funny?"

"Your ears clogged or what? We told you to take the glove off already!"

"Why, you hiding a tattoo on your left hand?"

Beru's furious voice came from within the shadows. "My king! If you allow me, I will separate their limbs and heads from their bodies. Then they will never —"

Denied.

"But—"

I said no.

After admonishing Beru, Jinwoo took off his glove before any more of his soldiers snapped. He showed them the ugly burn that stretched from his palm to his wrist.

“.....”

“.....”

The bullies were rendered speechless by the clearly serious burn.

“Dude, we were just joking. Why so serious?”

“Fine, put your glove back on. That’s gonna show up in my dreams.”

“Yo.”

The troublemakers seemed to think that was enough and walked away.

As Jinwoo slipped his glove back on, he firmly stepped on the shadow secretly following the boys.

Why are you following them?

“Skraaah!”

Jinwoo restrained Beru, who was incensed at the kids for making fun of his master, before looking up.

Jinwoo had enjoyed the interaction. The enemies who had been hostile toward him in the gap between dimensions were dead, as were the enemies who had threatened his life in dungeons. This was Seoul, South Korea, where there were no gates or magic beasts to be found. It was a place he could enjoy the peaceful norm that he had ushered in with his own hands.

This small confrontation just made him laugh.

This much is okay.

Jinwoo looked back at the four bullies, and they simultaneously tripped on something they couldn’t see on their way to the back of the classroom.

Whomp.

Beneath Jinwoo’s foot, Beru watched them take a tumble and then looked

back at Jinwoo.

“My king.....?”

I only did it for a laugh, okay?

Since it was funny, it was fine.

As if on cue, a female teacher entered the room and saw the boys sitting on the ground looking embarrassed. Jinwoo sat back down in his chair as he watched the confused teacher.

And so, his second high school tenure started.

Ding-dong, ding-dong!

From the youngest elementary school kids who were still more used to their parents’ arms than the classroom to the gray-haired teachers who were close to retirement, the sound of the dismissal bell echoing out loud lifted everyone’s spirits.

Most of Jinwoo’s classmates were so happy, they looked like they could fly away. Even Jinwoo looked much brighter.

“Don’t hang out with your new friends too late! Go home early, okay?”

Okay!

The mischievous voices of the male students and the higher-pitched voices of the female students answered together as the classroom quickly emptied.

Jinwoo purposefully took his time. As he packed his bag, he saw Younggil approaching slowly.

.....?

Jinwoo paused when Younggil cautiously asked him, “Um..... I walk in the direction toward Giga Mart. What about you?”

It looked like Younggil wanted to get closer to him. Jinwoo grinned.

A small act of kindness from years ago could be the beginning of a friendship.

But Jinwoo eventually shook his head. “Me too, but I have something to do today.”

“Oh.....” Younggil seemed disappointed.

Jinwoo gently patted his shoulder. “Let’s go.”

They left the building together.

“What? The track team?” Younggil sounded quite surprised.

Jinwoo nodded casually. “Yeah.”

Jinwoo had chosen this school over the one closer to home because it was the only one in the area that had a track team. Younggil cocked his head at the news.

Was Jinwoo good at running?

To be fair, Younggil had known Jinwoo for only about a month. He remembered Jinwoo being good at video games, but he hadn’t stood out in gym class or other activities. In any case, Younggil remembered Jinwoo always taking things easy.

You need to be athletic to join a high school track team, though.....

Younggil ended up following Jinwoo out of concern. Jinwoo crossed the field and walked to where the track team was stretching.

“Huh.....?”

The track team expected the two freshmen to walk past them or go in a different direction, so they all turned to stare when Jinwoo and Younggil walked right up to them.

One of the hefty older kids stepped forward. “What’s with you two?”

Jinwoo briefly took note of the team’s atmosphere and spoke with a smile. “I’d like to join the track team.”

The older kid was Taewoong Choi, the leader of the track team. He looked down at Jinwoo and the nervous-looking short kid standing behind him.

“You wanna join the team?”

“Yes.”

“Both of you?”

When Jinwoo looked over his shoulder, Younggil shook his head.

“No, just me.”

The others started to gather around them.

“So what’s going on? Does he want to try out for the team?”

“He’s the first freshman to ever barge in on the team like this.”

“Kid’s got some balls.”

Taewoong rubbed the back of his neck as he scanned Jinwoo from head to toe. “Are you a student athlete?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Did you run track in middle school?”

Although Jinwoo had experience running after the Monarchs in the gap between dimensions, that didn’t count for actual track-and-field experience. So he just shook his head.

“No, I didn’t.”

Up to that point, the older kids had seemed open to welcoming a new applicant. But now their faces hardened little by little. A freshman with no experience running track wanted to join the track team out of the blue. Did he think high school track was that easy?

One of the older kids with a short temper intervened just then. “If you don’t have any experience, why do you want to join the team?”

Jinwoo’s answer was simple. “Because there’s someone I need to meet at track-and-field competitions.”

Although she’d be in the middle school division, she was probably good enough to attend local competitions. She had been a promising track athlete before she gave up on that dream to become a high-rank hunter. That meant Jinwoo would naturally run into her at track meets where middle school and high school athletes competed, wouldn’t he? Jinwoo had concluded that this was the best way to insert himself into her life without interfering with it.

But the expressions of the older students seemed like they weren’t down with

this plan.

“Track-and-field competitions.....?”

Gushik Jung, the short-tempered kid, glared at him. He thought Jinwoo was mocking track and had gone too far. But before he could swear at the two freshmen and kick them out, Taewoong grinned and allowed Jinwoo to join.

“Fine.”

Gushik looked at Taewoong in disbelief. “What?”

“On one condition, though.”

Taewoong gave Gushik a look telling him to wait. He then pointed at a kid with glasses doing stretches in the distance.

“Do you see that dude over there?”

Jinwoo nodded. “Yes.”

“He’s a second-year reserve member and the worst runner on our team. You should be able to beat him at least if you want to qualify for the team.”

That was a lie. Jinwoo had already analyzed the eleventh grader’s abilities even before Taewoong’s explanation. Jinwoo snorted.

He looks skinny at first glance, but he has strong thighs and calves. He’s also oozing confidence.....

Jinwoo could tell that, from his stable breathing to his proper posture, he was an extraordinary athlete. These seniors were trying to make a laughingstock out of Jinwoo. Having seen right through them, Jinwoo could only laugh.

Realizing what Taewoong’s intentions were, Gushik relaxed. “That’s right. Your goal is to attend competitions, right? So this test should be a piece of cake if you want to join the team.”

Jinwoo didn’t like Gushik’s smarmy face, but he decided to play the part.

“So, uh..... Is he really a reserve?”

“I swear!”

The other members of the track team tried hard not to laugh at Taewoong’s

earnest tone.

Technically, it's not a lie, but he only became a reserve after twisting his ankle during winter training. He finished third in a local competition last year.

Hence, he really was a reserve, and he really was the worst runner after having to take some time off to heal.

Jinwoo cheerfully answered the sly Taewoong.

"Okay. I'll give it a shot."

Jinwoo had fallen for it. The team mentally cheered.

This dude couldn't even recognize the third-place winner of the local competition, even though he wants to join the team.

It was especially hard for Taewoong to keep from bursting out in laughter as he brokered the deal with Jinwoo right in front of the other kids.

"But it's no fun if it's just a race, so... How about if you win, you get to join the team, but if you lose, you have to clean the team's locker room and do our laundry for a month?"

"Sounds good."

"J-Jinwoo..."

Younggil tried to stop Jinwoo, but Jinwoo reassured him he'd be okay.

Let's see how long this dude can keep smiling.

Taewoong faced the reserve member and called, "Sangin, mind doing a lap?"

Sangin Woo, the ace of the team, finished warming up and stood up straight. "No problem."

He took off his glasses and handed them to a teammate, his eyes on fire. Jinwoo handed his jacket and bag to Younggil as he met Sangin's gaze. While the track team couldn't wait to teach the freshman a lesson, Jinwoo was trying to calculate how well he would have to run to give them a little surprise.

"You ready, freshie?"

"Yes."

“How about you, Sangin?”

“Ready.”

Jinwoo and Sangin stood side by side at the starting line. Jinwoo’s initial pose was one optimized to leap into battle at any time, while Sangin got into the textbook runner’s pose. The other team members mocked Jinwoo’s awkward pose.

“What the hell is he doing?”

“Is he serious about joining the team? He’s a newbie who doesn’t know the first thing about running track!”

Jinwoo ignored their whispers and calmed his breathing.

“Ready...,” Taewoong shouted out to signal the start of the race. “Go!”

* * *

“Mr. Park, are you feeling better now?”

“Oh..... Um, yes.....”

Kisul Park, the Venomous Snake, gave a vague answer before quickly brushing past his fellow teachers in the hall with a grimace.

I can’t believe I was made a fool in front of the whole school.....

He must’ve been seeing things. Maybe it was because he hadn’t had a good breakfast. Kisul ducked inside the male teachers’ lounge to get away from what felt like the mocking eyes of students. He heaved a big sigh.

“Haah.....”

He needed a smoke. Kisul put a cigarette in his mouth and stood in front of the window. He absent-mindedly looked down at the track field as he lit his cigarette. His eyes widened as he spotted something, and he hurriedly crouched and pressed his back to the wall.

Wh-what? Why is he running around the track with the team?

At that very moment, the track-and-field coach entered the lounge and discovered Kisul.

“Mr. Park!”

The coach ran over to help Kisul get up, assuming he wasn't feeling well again.

"Are you okay? You sure you don't need to go see a doctor?"

"I-I'm fine. I was just feeling a little dizzy....." Kisul shrugged it off and asked, "So.....why is Jinwoo Sung running with the track team?"

"Oh..... Is that the student's name, Jinwoo Sung?" The coach laughed as he looked out the window over Kisul's shoulder. "Apparently, he came to join the team..... And they couldn't reject him because he's quite good, so they told him they wanted to test his stamina."

"S-stamina?"

"Yes, he's on his twentieth lap. I got tired just watching them, so I came here."

Athletics and sports teams. There was nothing better to expend that youthful energy. Thoughts ran through Kisul's head. Jinwoo, whom Kisul had labeled as a troublemaker, was making a real effort to join a sports team in order to discipline himself.

Maybe..... Maybe I misjudged him.....

And there was no such thing as a boy who walked around with monsters attached to him. Jinwoo had to be a perfectly normal student simply trying to find his place in school or on a team to make up for lost time. To think he'd conjured up monsters or ghosts in his imagination regarding such a student..... The Venomous Snake felt ashamed of himself.

Kisul straightened himself up and chuckled.

Yes..... I need to look at him without any bias. That should clear this misunderstanding.

The coach looked at Kisul with concern, as he seemed to be undergoing mood swings.

"Mr. Park.....?"

"Yes, I'm fine now. I don't feel dizzy anymore."

"Oh..... That's good."

Kisul slowly turned around as the coach let go of his arm. It was a bright

spring day, and Jinwoo ran around the track, sweating in the sun. Who could think badly of him? Kisul noticed that Jinwoo was effortlessly lapping the panting members of the track team.

This morning was definitely.....

The scene below him suddenly darkened and revealed an endless army of shadowy creatures. His knees almost gave out again, but he gritted his teeth and steadied his legs.

I'm hallucinating! It's not real!

At that moment, the monstrous ant standing in the front line of the soldiers with black armor looked at Kisul and opened its jaws wide.

"Skrah!"

"A-ahhh!"

Kisul ended up falling on his rear and passing out.

"....." Having seen what Beru had done, Igris elbowed the ant. "I told you not to do that."

"Kree..... I guess that human can really see us."

Beru scratched his temple in confusion and then slammed his forehead on the ground even before his master ordered him to do so.

* * *

Late at night, Detective Jinchul Woo and the rookie were having dinner at a restaurant specializing in grilled offal. Since they'd been drinking a lot, their lips were looser than usual, and the rookie especially found it easier to talk more freely than normal.

"Uh, Detective Woo....."

"Hmm?"

"You're still investigating these cases involving criminals who turned themselves in, right?"

"....."

What was this dude getting at now? Jinchul could feel a headache coming on

as he continued to drink without saying a word. Meanwhile, the rookie continued his line of questioning without missing a beat.

“That day..... You saw something, didn’t you?”

“What day?”

Jinchul feigned ignorance, but the rookie detective laughed.

“Come on, Detective Woo..... You know exactly what I’m talking about. You actually saw something the day that criminal disappeared, didn’t you?”

This newbie really knew how to catch people off guard every so often.

That’s a great skill for a detective.

Jinchul reminisced about his early detective days and couldn’t stop his small laugh.

“What if I did?”

“Seriously?”

The rookie seemed to shake off his tipsiness as his eyes lit up, and he gave Jinchul his full attention. He was, after all, closer in age to a college student than someone used to the nine-to-five grind. That’s why he likely voluntarily applied to the violent crimes investigation unit, which paid little but involved a heavy workload.

Jinchul was normally tight-lipped about matters like this, but whether it was the drink or he’d just been dying to talk to someone about it.....

“It was an...an ant monster.”

The rookie swallowed so hard that Jinchul could hear him from across the table.

“I’m not even sure what exactly I saw on that day. But they looked like ants to me.”

“Ant monsters? You saw huge ants?”

“Well, they were ants, but.....”

At that moment, a drunk stumbling past the two of them came to a halt.

“Th-those ant monsters..... Did they have human bodies with ant heads?”

Jinchul and the rookie spun to face the newcomer.

* * *

There’s a saying that the ground hardens after a rainfall. People might grow closer after a fight, but the bond of sweat and passion formed between boys was unbreakable.

“One-two, one-two!”

The morning mist blanketed the field as the track team counted out their pace.

“You doing okay, Jinwoo?”

Jinwoo called back from his place next to the captain, Taewoong. “You know it!”

“Awesome! One-two, one-two!”

Taewoong sped up a little as he yelled at the top of his lungs.

“Our goal is number one in Korea!”

“Our goal is number one in—”

His teammates stopped short of completing the changed call and response.

“Captain! Wasn’t our goal to win the local competition?”

“Come on! That goal is too small for our new ace! Again! Our goal is number one in Korea!”

“Number one in Korea!”

“Number one in Korea!”

The captain glanced at Sangin, who was running right behind him. “Sangin, are you crying?”

“N-no, Captain!”

“You’re the ace of the second years! Don’t be weak! The ace of the team might have changed, but we can’t be number one in Korea without you!”

“I-I’ll do my best, Captain!”

“Excellent! Number one in Korea! Number one in Korea!”

“Number one in Korea! Number one in Korea!”

“Number one in Korea! Number one in Korea!”

Younggil, who had been roped into the track team alongside Jinwoo, struggled to keep up in the middle of the pack. He seemed to be growing paler by the second.

“Huff, huff, huff!”

Jinwoo clicked his tongue hearing Younggil panting so hard. He had recommended Younggil join the team to build up his stamina, and his friend hadn’t resisted the idea, but it was probably only a matter of time before he passed out at this rate. But with the older students being so gung-ho about training, it would be difficult for Younggil to sit out for the rest of it.

Jinwoo had no choice but to gather some mana on the tip of his fingers and send it flying to Younggil. The mana rode the wind like dandelion spores and entered Younggil’s nose and mouth.

“.....?”

The mana instantly recovered his stamina and temporarily increased endurance, reaction time, flexibility, the rate of recovery, *etc.* It was a care package of buffs from Jinwoo to his friend, and because the Shadow Monarch had been a deity-like figure in the other world, the effectiveness of his buffs was impressive.

“Huh? What?” Younggil’s eyes widened after inhaling the mana.

Wh-what’s going on? My body..... My body feels like it’s burning!

Veins bulged on Younggil’s legs as they pushed against the ground.

Tak, tak, tak!

Younggil began to pass the older kids in front of him.

“Ohhh!” He eventually pulled ahead of the pack.

What.....?

Taewoong was inspired by Younggil’s spurt. “That rookie is on fire! C’mon,

guys, we can't let a freshie beat us!"

"Yeah, Captain!"

"Right, Captain!"

"Catch up to the rookie! Let's go!"

"Go, go!"

"Yeah!"

Jinwoo worried for a second that he may have given Younggil a bit too much of a boost, but the track-and-field team was on fire that day.

* * *

As the Venomous Snake, Kisul, welcomed students at the main gate, he also kept a watchful eye from a distance on the track team members, who had been training hard since earlier that morning. Despite his concerns, Jinwoo seemed to have adjusted to the team without causing any trouble. The principal had even credited Kisul for it this morning.

"The track team's coach told me that you've been keeping an eye on Jinwoo Sung."

"Um..... That's right."

"We have you to thank for keeping the problem student out of trouble. I know I can count on you."

"Oh....."

Considering how Kisul had collapsed or passed out every time he'd looked at Jinwoo thus far, he wanted to crawl into a hole as the principal heaped praises on him. Kisul hated how he couldn't bring himself to even look at Jinwoo despite the principal thinking so highly of him.

That was why he had gotten drunk and shared things with strangers he normally wouldn't.

Why did I do that.....?

Kisul wanted to pull his hair out whenever he thought back to that night. A few days ago, he had gone to that offal restaurant because he was so stressed

out. That was where he.....

“Th-those ant monsters..... Did they have human bodies with ant heads?”

When Jinchul and the rookie had turned to look at him, Kisul felt like he had instantly sobered up.

“Oh..... What am I saying.....? I’m sorry. I drank too much. Please don’t mind me.”

Kisul politely bowed to the two men and was about to go back to his table, but Jinchul stopped him.

“Hang on, sir.”

By the time Kisul turned around, his face flushed from alcohol, Jinchul had already pulled out the chair next to him.

“This ant monster..... Can you give us any more details about it?”

Who would Kisul tell about seeing strange things next to one specific student? Maybe a psychiatrist? What parents would approve of a teacher who had to see a shrink? Having had to keep this to himself all this time, Kisul opened up to Jinchul with tears in his eyes.

“You know, I’ve taught students with charisma before. But would I explain this to anyone else?” He felt better as soon as he got it off his chest. He felt like he could finally take in what was going on around him.

“Anyway.....why were two detectives like you talking about monsters in a place like this?”

Jinchul exchanged glances with the rookie detective before launching into an explanation without revealing anything regarding his own encounter.

“.....So the higher-ups gave us an order to investigate, but clues were hard to come by. It’s been like grasping at straws.”

Jinchul took out a business card from the inside pocket of his jacket. “I’d like to stop by the school as part of the investigation. Are you okay with that?”

“Oh, of course. We will gladly cooperate. Please come by anytime.”

Although the drinking session ended on a friendly note, Kisul worried

afterward whether he had stirred the pot for no reason.

What on earth would a student have to do with criminals turning themselves in.....?

Least of all, a boy who trained hard with his team so early in the morning.

Kisul couldn't bring himself to take a good look at Jinwoo for fear of spotting something strange again. He periodically snuck a peek at the student but would then quickly shake his head. He eventually talked to a fellow teacher at the main gate.

"Mr. Yoon, I'm sorry, but I don't feel good. I had too much to drink last night....."

"Ha-ha. No need to apologize, Mr. Park. Please go inside and take it easy. I've got this."

"Okay, thank you."

Kisul took one final glance at Jinwoo before trudging into the school. Up to that point, Jinwoo hadn't shown any interest in Kisul, but he finally looked in his direction.

.....

Jinwoo had noticed the teacher keeping an eye on him, which Jinwoo couldn't ignore.

Bellion quietly spoke to Jinwoo from the darkness. "My lord..... Wouldn't it be better to erase that human's memories and take away his sight?"

Upon Jinwoo's return from the gap between dimensions, the envoy of the Rulers had given him a warning. Even the tiniest bit of the Shadow Monarch's power could affect this world in a big way. And so Jinwoo had tried to avoid interfering directly with anyone unless it was absolutely necessary.

Not yet..... Let's keep an eye on him first.

"Understood, my lord."

Jinwoo stared at the entrance Kisul had walked through before turning around. The members of the track team waved at him to join them as they

made their way to the locker room.

* * *

Jinchul hesitated a few times in front of the school's main gate. It was a week ago at that offal restaurant that he had gotten the unexpected lead. Ever since, a myriad of thoughts had raced through his head. He could just dismiss the teacher's explanation as nonsense, but when two seemingly unrelated incidents turned out to have a similarity, there could be a huge break in the case.

Criminals turning themselves in after seeing monsters and a teacher who can see monsters surrounding a student.....

It was an odd coincidence, so he had a hunch that they were connected. His biggest problem was how to approach the student. He couldn't take what the teacher had said as fact and bring up monsters out of the blue. However, he wouldn't get anywhere if he was too vague with his line of questioning.

"Do you know anything about a shadow monster? How about an ant that walks on two legs like a human?"

No matter how much he rehearsed it, it didn't come out right. Jinchul sighed as he went through his notes for the investigation.

It'll be a miracle if he doesn't think I'm crazy.....

Jinchul thought about it for a while and then turned to leave. It wasn't the right time for this, and he needed a better excuse for being here.

As he was about to leave, he happened to look down at the ground.

Shf.

Jinchul was known among his peers for having keen eyes. If it wasn't for that, he would've missed the shadow moving from the shade of a tree over to the wall. He was sure of what he saw. Goose bumps spread over his body as Jinchul turned toward school.

There..... There is definitely something here!

Jinchul made up his mind. He didn't care if people pointed their fingers at him and called him crazy. He was determined to find out where this sense of loss was coming from and why seeing those ant monsters had brought him a

semblance of peace.

Jinchul resolutely strode through the gates.

* * *

Meanwhile, Jinwoo was spinning his mechanical pencil in one hand during geography class while several kids dozed off around him.

Did he see the sentry?

As expected of the former president of the Hunter's Association. Jinchul didn't have any memories from his past life, but it looked like he had the same keen eyesight.

Jinwoo thought back to the last time he'd seen Jinchul. The other man had shown tears when Jinwoo announced he was going to take on the Rulers all by himself. And Jinwoo clearly remembered Jinchul's voice asking him to avenge President Go.

Maybe that was why Jinwoo couldn't get rid of the smile on his face, despite this disruption to the normal life he'd been trying to have.

The knock on the classroom door caught the geography teacher off guard.

"A d-detective?"

"It's nothing serious. I just have some questions to ask Jinwoo Sung."

Ohhh!

The kids in the classroom gasped at the detective's arrival and stared at Jinwoo.

The time had come. With a smile, Jinwoo opened his eyes and made eye contact with Jinchul. Even before the teacher called on him, Jinchul could tell right away who he was.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

Jinchul's heart felt like it would explode.

* * *

Jinchul led Jinwoo to the end of the hall, stopping far away enough so no one could hear their conversation. Jinwoo quietly followed him, glancing back at the

classroom. As a student, he felt quite odd to be leaving in the middle of the class.

Jinchul understood his concern and started with an apology. "I'm sorry to pull you out of class."

"It's okay."

Because he could see how hard his teacher worked, Jinwoo bit his tongue to keep from admitting the class was boring and he was glad to skip it. Instead, he looked up at Jinchul.

This Jinchul Woo was younger than the one he'd known and currently a head taller than Jinwoo. His shoulders were much broader than Jinwoo's, too.

He looks more like a gangster than a detective.

Jinwoo couldn't hide his happiness at seeing an old friend once more. It had been decades since he'd seen President Woo, if he counted the time he'd wandered around the gap between dimensions. Though he tried not to, his face broke into a smile.

.....?

On the other hand, Jinchul didn't know what to make of Jinwoo smiling. Few people could act relaxed when receiving a sudden visit from a detective like this, especially one with Jinchul's countenance. A high school student should be even less at ease, but the boy standing before Jinchul was able to smile.

This kid..... There's something different about him.

Jinchul had felt it ever since he entered the classroom. In his line of work, Jinchul had encountered serial killers and gangsters who ruled entire neighborhoods, but none of them seemed as poised as Jinwoo.

How could a student have eyes like that?

The tension made Jinchul swallow nervously as his heart pounded in his ears. For starters, Jinchul took out his notepad to begin asking some questions swimming around in his head.

"By any chance, did a shadow..... No, I mean, an ant—"

He cut himself off as he stared at his notebook before pulling a pen out from the inner pocket of his jacket. Jinwoo watched Jinchul as the detective concentrated on drawing something. Jinchul handed the finished product to Jinwoo.

“.....” Jinwoo was impressed.

I won't lie—he's pretty good.

Jinchul had drawn a rough sketch of Beru. It wasn't very detailed, but the drawing showed an ant's head, human limbs, sharp claws, and wings. Anyone who knew Beru would immediately recognize that it depicted him.

“Does this bring anything to mind?” asked Jinchul.

Jinwoo looked up to see that Jinchul was blushing a little bit. The detective was fully aware that what he was doing was quite absurd. But it seemed like he was desperately searching for his long-lost memories.

“.....Do you recognize it?” Jinchul pressed.

Before the detective could get any more embarrassed, Jinwoo answered him.

“Yes.”

Ba-dump!

Jinchul's heart leaped.

“Y-you do?” His voice grew louder.

In contrast, Jinwoo seemed rather calm. “Yes.”

Jinchul's eyes widened. Finally. He'd finally found it.

Breathless, he hurriedly asked Jinwoo, “What is this ant monster? And who are you really?”

When Jinwoo stepped back at Jinchul's agitation, the detective realized his mistake and calmed down.

“Sorry, I got too excited. I've been after this thing for a long time.”

Jinchul needed to take it one step at a time when questioning this student. It had been hard enough to get this far with the clues he had, so there was no

need to rush. Jinchul reined himself in and continued in a calmer voice.

“So you’re familiar with the creature depicted in this drawing?”

“Yes.” Jinwoo nodded with an innocent look on his face. “Isn’t this a monster from one of those shows that use special effects? Like *Kamen Rider*.”

“Oh.....”

Jinchul was struck with a profound sense of defeat, like an ocean wave sweeping away a sandcastle he had worked on so diligently. He gave a small sigh. It was all the more crushing because he’d had such high hopes.

Jinchul looked as if he didn’t even have enough energy to hold up his notepad. His arm fell limply to his side. For a moment, he was upset at the boy for giving him false hope, but it wasn’t the boy’s fault for merely saying what he knew.

“Thank you for your time.”

“Are we done here?”

“Yes. I’ve already spoken to your teacher, so there shouldn’t be a problem.”

Jinchul was about to put away his notepad when Jinwoo spoke up.

“That monster drawing, can I have it as a souvenir?”

Jinwoo’s happiness coaxed a smile out of Jinchul as well. He flipped through his notepad and gazed down at his drawing for a moment before ripping the page out cleanly and handing it to Jinwoo.

“Here.”

“Thank you.”

With that, Jinchul turned and walked down the stairs, not wanting to stick around too long and think of what could have been.

.....

Jinwoo stayed and listened to Jinchul’s footsteps going down the stairs. A shadow spread out smoothly across the floor like water to let Igris out.

“My lord.”

“Yeah?”

“Why.....didn’t you tell him the truth?”

Igris still had memories from the time he used to be human. He knew better than anyone how sad and hard it was to be forgotten. From his point of view, this encounter with Jinchul had been a great opportunity. Wouldn’t it be better for Jinwoo if he had at least one person who knew how he had saved this world?

Igris sounded regretful, but Jinwoo shook his head.

“They say ignorance is bliss.”

Even if it was the forced result of the forbidden tool, Jinwoo didn’t think he had the right to choose which memories were forgotten and which ones remained. That would be the act of a god. That’s why he had let Jinchul go.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

Jinwoo suddenly looked down at his left hand. It had taken a direct hit from the Dragon King’s Breath of Destruction and would not heal.

An unpleasant and unforgettable memory was similar to Jinwoo’s burn. It was a permanent scar.

Although it was Jinchul’s wish, it wasn’t up to Jinwoo to grant said wish. There was no trace of pain or suffering at the hands of magic beasts or Monarchs in anyone’s memory, and Jinwoo had no intention of giving those memories back.

“I understand, my lord.” Igris quietly returned to the shadows.

Jinwoo stared down at the stairs for a while before going back to class.

* * *

At recess, all eyes were on Jinwoo. After all, how often did a detective visit a school just to speak to a student? It was like something out of a movie. Obviously, everyone was focused on the hero of the story. Even the girls who had already been interested in Jinwoo joined in on the crowd flocking around him.

“What was that about?”

“What did the detective want with you, Jinwoo?”

Jinwoo laughed at everyone’s sudden interest in him and quickly came up with an excuse.

“He’s just someone I know. He wanted to ask me something.”

“Wow, that’s cool.”

“Are you close to the detective?”

“Must be nice, Jinwoo.”

Jinwoo found it hard to hold back his laughter as the kids’ interests were piqued by different things than he’d assumed.

Why are you looking at me like a proud mom, Younggil?

Thanks to the detective’s visit, the invisible wall between Jinwoo and his classmates had now crumbled. The girls seized the opportunity to approach him.

“The other boys were saying you’re totally buff.”

“Really? Do you work out, Jinwoo?”

“I’ve seen you running track with the seniors!”

“Wow, look at his broad shoulders.”

Hee-hee-hee!

Just when Jinwoo was trying to work out a good way to get these girls to go back to their seats, they were interrupted by the four bullies, who were disgruntled that he was the center of attention.

“You’re quite popular, aren’t you? Even the police came to see you.”

As they approached, the other boys went back to their seats, and the girls silently stepped back.

Junshik Nam, the leader of the pack, smirked as he tapped Jinwoo’s shoulder where the girls had touched him earlier. “Does joking around like this count as bullying? Are you going to tell the detective?”

If this boy continued to hit Jinwoo, Junshik would be the one to get hurt. Sure enough, Junshik flushed at the combination of Jinwoo's look of pity and his throbbing hand.

"What the hell are you looking at?"

Junshik flung everything off Jinwoo's desk. Textbooks, notebooks, and his pencil case hit the floor. From the shadows, ten million shadow soldiers cried out at what they were witnessing.

Junshik then grabbed Jinwoo's collar as Jinwoo's eyes narrowed. "What? You wanna go? Wipe that look off your face while I'm still being nice."

At that moment, a huge arm wrapped around Junshik's neck.

"Argh!"

"You got business with our precious track team ace?"

It was Taewoong and Gushik. Jinwoo's four classmates grew pale as the seniors put them all in headlocks.

Jinwoo wordlessly stood from his seat and picked up his pencil case. Jinah had given it to him as a gift for starting high school. If it had gotten damaged in any way, he wouldn't have let that slide. Jinwoo dusted it off and put it on his desk before turning to Taewoong and Gushik.

"What're you doing here?"

"We're here to stop you from beating these dummies to a pulp."

"Yeah, right."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!" Taewoong let out a belly laugh before he continued. "I forgot to tell you guys about the team welcome party. You and Younggil have time today, right?"

When Jinwoo looked to Younggil, his friend nodded.

"Yes."

"We'll see you two after school then."

Jinwoo stopped the seniors as they left the class. "Wait, where are you taking them?"

“Ha-ha! These four?”

Taewoong and Gushik exchanged looks.

“You got any ideas?”

“Should we do a lap for some light exercise?”

“Sounds good!”

Soon, shouts of “number one in Korea” echoed through the halls.

* * *

Ding-dong, ding-dong!

When the final dismissal bell rang, Jinwoo exited the school’s main gate with the members of the track team.

Thanks to Jinwoo’s occasional support, Younggil had gotten used to training with the team and had even learned to enjoy breaking a sweat. He walked alongside the older kids, listening to their advice, as Jinwoo brought up the rear.

It was a normal day, just like any other.

Gushik looked back at Jinwoo from the front of the crowd. “Oh yeah, Jinwoo. What was up with those four today? Do you need us to talk to them?”

Jinwoo shook his head. “Nah, it’s okay.”

“I’m not saying this because I’m worried about you, okay? I just don’t want you to miss any competitions because of them.”

Jinwoo grinned. “I promise I won’t.”

At that moment, someone suddenly waiting next to the school gates called out to them.

“Hunter Jinwoo Sung.”

Time seemed to stop as Jinwoo abruptly stopped walking and slowly turned around. Detective Jinchul Woo had been waiting for him.

Jinwoo’s voice was shaky. “How.....?”

His response confirmed Jinchul’s suspicions.

Jinchul’s eyes grew red as he fought back tears. “It.....really is you, Hunter

Sung.”

* * *

“That monster drawing, can I have it as a souvenir?”

A few hours earlier, Jinwoo had asked for the drawing of Beru drawn by Jinchul as a souvenir of their reunion.

It really looks like Beru, so.....

A protest came from his shadow. “My king! I beg of you to pay no heed to those rubbish scribbles!”

As Jinwoo ignored Beru’s whining, Jinchul looked down at his drawing for a beat as if trying to shake off any disappointment before cleanly ripping it out of his notepad and handing it to Jinwoo.

“Here.”

“Thank you.”

As Jinwoo happily took the drawing, their fingertips brushed.

It may have been a tiny action, but the biggest events in history often begin with small gestures.

Jinchul turned and descended the stairs.

This was stupid of me.

With the hope of finally catching a break, he’d ended up doing something he’d have a hard time explaining to even the rookie detective. Regret flooded him.

It’s like the staircase just wants to drag out my humiliation.....

Jinchul grumbled as he made his way down the stairs, but then suddenly he froze.

Huh.....?

He’d heard a voice.

“Do you trust me, President Woo?”

.....?

Unnerved, Jinchul looked up and down the stairwell, but it was completely empty except for him. It was dead silent during class time.

Jinchul wrinkled his brow as he continued down the stairs. He then heard another voice.

"Yes, I do."

That was his own voice.

Wh-what the hell?

If he was one to scare easily, he would've fallen to the floor in shock or let out a shriek. Instead, he frowned as he calmly checked his surroundings and brought out his notepad and a pen.

Now I'm starting to hear things. Does this, combined with the empty feeling in my heart and seeing the ant monster, mean I'm going clinically insane?

He scribbled down his notes, ending with a question. Feeling out of sorts, he quickly stuffed the notepad away, hurried down the stairs, and bolted out of the school as fast as he could.

But then Jinchul was hit with another auditory hallucination that threw him into disarray.

"Then please believe everything I'm about to show you."

"Argh!"

Jinchul gritted his teeth and covered his ears. The voice he had never heard and things he had never said began swirling around inside his head. He was overwhelmed with confusion.

"Wh-what is this?!"

Among all the voices, one phrase stood out.

"Hunter Jinwoo Sung."

"Hunter Sung."

"Then, how can we..... No, how can I help you?"

"Hunter Sung!"

“Hunter Jinwoo Sung!”

The name Hunter Jinwoo Sung kept repeating in Jinchul’s head.

Jinwoo Sung..... That’s the name of the student I just met, isn’t it?

Jinchul had heard that patients with mental illnesses who made up strange stories tended to pull from the people around them. Was this what was happening to him? He walked unsteadily down the street, his head throbbing. He was in such agony that he couldn’t even lift his hands to massage his temples, but at the same time, the hole in his heart seemed to fill little by little every time he thought of Hunter Jinwoo Sung’s name.

Jinchul collapsed on a nearby park bench and repeated the name swirling inside his head.

Hunter Jinwoo Sung, Hunter Jinwoo Sung, Hunter Jinwoo Sung.....

It had to be some kind of sign. Jinchul definitely knew the name Jinwoo Sung. He needed to remember it. He had to grasp hold of the memory. He needed to remember everything he could about Jinwoo and find out why he’d forgotten.

“Ngh!”

Jinchul persevered through his severe headache until he finally remembered a certain exchange.

“Do you trust me, President Woo?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then please believe everything I’m about to show you.”

“Excuse me?”

Someone touched their finger to Jinchul’s forehead. At that precise moment, darkness clouded Jinchul’s vision, followed by a barrage of images.

They were memories connecting the past, present, and future. They were stories of gates, magic beasts, hunters, Rulers, and Monarchs.

“This is insane..... How could this be.....?”

Jinchul was at a loss for words. Jinwoo, the Shadow Monarch himself, looked lonely as he answered.

"It's because a higher being's memories aren't affected by the flow of time."

A Monarch's memories transcended time itself.

* * *

"Huff, huff....." Jinchul was out of breath after the flashback.

His mind had been briefly connected to that of a higher being, Jinwoo, in a timeline that no longer existed. In that instant when he'd come into contact with Jinwoo, the memories that had been sealed somewhere in Jinchul's soul were brought to the surface once more.

"Oh my God....."

With the hole in his heart finally filled, Jinchul began to weep.

He remembered the question he'd asked Jinwoo when he heard Jinwoo's plan.

"Hunter Sung.....are you actually planning to fight them? By yourself?"

And now, the answer to that question was right in front of him. A young man walked by listening to music on his earphones. A couple whispering sweet nothings to each other. An old man walking his dog. People warming up near the exercise equipment.

There were no gates, no magic beasts, and no fighting. Jinchul sobbed as he took in the peace created by Jinwoo's own hands.

"Hunter Sung..... You did it."

Jinchul cried for a long time as he recalled the screams of those who had been killed by magic beasts.

No, I don't have time for this now.

The veteran detective wiped away his tears with a calloused hand.

Jinchul needed Jinwoo to know that though the rest of the world might have forgotten, Jinchul at least knew that Jinwoo had fought for them all.

He was overcome with the duty to tell Jinwoo. But at the same time, Jinchul wondered if that was the right thing for Jinwoo or not.

He's left his past as a hunter behind and is living as an ordinary student now.

If Jinwoo wanted people to know, he'd had so many opportunities to tell Jinchul about their past lives. He could've answered Jinchul's questions or transmitted the memories to him with a touch of his finger like before. Yet despite their coincidental encounter, Jinwoo had sent Jinchul away without a word.

Perhaps Jinwoo didn't want his current ordinary life to be disrupted. So wouldn't it be better for Hunter Sung if Jinchul pretended not to know anything and they both went back to their everyday lives?

Jinchul was lost in thought, agonizing over it for hours until school let out. When he saw the students walking through the park, Jinchul finally reached a decision.

.....Okay.

He would leave the decision in Jinwoo's hands. If Jinwoo continued to play dumb, Jinchul would respect his choice. However, if Jinwoo showed even the tiniest reaction.....

Jinchul hurriedly made his way back to Jinwoo's school and waited, even as it seemed all the students had already left. He had a gut feeling that Hunter Sung was still inside the school. Many minutes and several cigarettes later.....

"I just don't want you to miss any competitions because of them."

"I promise I won't."

Jinchul spotted Jinwoo passing the main gate. Happy to see Jinwoo, he strode toward him.

"Hunter Jinwoo Sung."

Ba-dump!

He mustered up every bit of courage he had to say those words. His heart raced as he awaited Jinwoo's reaction.

Sure enough, Jinwoo stiffened in shock and turned around. "How.....?"

Jinwoo's eyes told Jinchul everything he needed to know, and the detective fought back tears.

“It.....really is you, Hunter Sung.”

* * *

The two men moved to the park near the school where Jinchul’s memories of the past had returned to him. The small pond in the middle of the park was dyed gold by the reflection of the sunset.

Jinchul stopped walking and spoke first. “I’m worried I’ve messed things up for you and your friends.”

Jinwoo shook his head, smiling lightly. “They’re good people. Extremely competitive, but.....”

When Jinchul had asked Jinwoo for his time, Jinwoo had to excuse himself from the seniors. Since they’d already made plans, the older kids might’ve been upset, but instead.....

“Don’t be too late!”

“We’ll take Younggil hostage until you show up.”

“Wait, what?”

The rest of the track team went ahead, dragging poor Younggil along.

Jinwoo chuckled as he remembered Younggil’s alarmed expression. “I can’t stay too long, since my friend’s life is at stake.”

Seeing Jinwoo doing well put a smile on Jinchul’s face, too.

“I understand. Then I’ll get straight to the point.” His smile dropped. “How long.....did you fight against them in the rift between dimensions?”

Officially, Jinwoo had disappeared for two years. But Jinchul knew from the Shadow Monarch’s memories how formidable the Monarchs were. He knew very well it wasn’t possible to defeat them in that short a time.

Jinwoo answered cautiously. “Twenty-seven years.....”

This answer knocked the wind out of Jinchul. Jinwoo had spent nearly thirty years in a place where nothing could exist, battling their enemies the entire time. He couldn’t even begin to imagine how taxing the battle must have been.

He was at a loss for words, then barely managed to get out: “.....Do you

regret it?”

Jinwoo answered without any hesitation.

“No.” This was the one thing Jinwoo was confident about. “I’d make the same decision over and over again.”

Going to a baseball game with his dad on his day off. Eating his mom’s wonderful soybean-paste stew. Jinah’s blinding smile, unmarred by the fear of magic beasts. Every little thing was invaluable to him. If the price he had to pay was to take on this burden alone, Jinwoo would do it again gladly.

“I have absolutely no regrets.”

The calm in Jinwoo’s voice moved Jinchul. He considered expressing his thanks, but swallowed his words. They weren’t enough to properly express how he felt toward Jinwoo.

Jinchul looked down at his watch as he remembered Younggil being held hostage, then looked back up at Jinwoo.

“It looks like you’re enjoying your life now.”

Jinwoo laughed. “It’s fun so far. Except for the fact that I consciously change my physical appearance every now and then because I don’t age anymore.”

Everlasting youth and immortality. Hunter Jinwoo Sung had become the Shadow Monarch and gained the power of a god. Despite the strength he wielded, Jinwoo had decided to live like an ordinary human.....

“Have you thought about what you want to do in the future?”

“Not yet.”

“Then.....how about joining me?” Jinchul showed Jinwoo the police ID in his wallet.

“You mean.....a police officer?”

“A lot of brutal criminals have been coming in recently. Something about a shadow monster?”

Jinwoo inspected Jinchul’s ID and then returned his wallet with a smile. “If I became a police officer, there wouldn’t be anything left for other officers to

do.”

“We’re doing our best to make it that kind of world.”

Jinchul hadn’t changed. He conducted himself as a detective the same way he had as the head of the surveillance team and later president of the Hunter’s Association.

“I’ll think about it.”

Jinwoo seemed to be growing concerned for his friend’s well-being, so Jinchul bade him good-bye.

“I’ll be waiting for you.”

“Please don’t. I’ve heard police officers work hard but don’t get paid much.”

With a wave, Jinwoo walked away. Jinchul smiled as he watched him go.

Work hard but don’t get paid much, huh?

Jinwoo’s accurate and irrefutable assessment made Jinchul laugh. At the same time, he thought of the rookie detective who had joined the unit despite the circumstances.

Is he off duty today?

Jinchul figured he owed the rookie a meal.

Jinchul gave a deep bow to Jinwoo, who was now a small outline in the far distance. As the only one who knew of Jinwoo’s sacrifice, Jinchul sincerely expressed his gratitude on behalf of everyone in the world for the first and possibly last time.

6.

It appeared out of the blue. Sometime at the tail end of April, the emergency call center in the United States received a certain phone call.

“So, I’m a traveler currently crossing the desert.”

Travelers often got lost, so the agent assumed that the call was from another poor soul trying to find their way in the desert.

"Are you lost, sir?"

"No, it's not like that."

"Then did something happen to you, sir?"

"No, no, I'm fine. I called you because I wanted to report something I saw."

The agent kept her voice as soothing as possible in order not to panic the caller as she prepared to connect with the emergency dispatch center.

"Is it something urgent? Should we send someone over?"

"I.....think so? To be honest, I'm not sure how to explain this."

The agent looked up the caller's identification, since he sounded somewhat hesitant. Based on his emergency call records and the fact that he was a university professor and a family man, the agent didn't think he'd be the type to make prank calls.

"Sir, if you explain what's going on, we can respond appropriately."

"....."

"Could you please explain the situation to me slowly?"

The man took a deep breath on the other end of the line.

"Something is about to break. There are a lot of cracks."

Could there be a building about to collapse in the middle of the desert? The agent cocked her head in confusion as she pressed him.

"Could you tell me where the cracks are?"

"They're, uh....."

The man hesitated before explaining in a tone that didn't hide his own disbelief.

"The sky..... There are cracks in the sky!"

* * *

April was a busy month for all students, but Jinwoo was especially busy because of midterm exams and track-and-field competitions.

He was studying late one night when Jinah brought him some fruit.

“Mom says to have some.”

Illuminated by lamplight, Jinwoo raised up his head. “What about Dad?”

“He’s on night shift again this week.”

Jinwoo nodded as he took the plate of melon slices neatly arranged by Jinah. As she turned to leave the room, he tugged his sister’s ponytail.

“Haaaang on.”

“Ack!” Jinah spun around.

“Where’s the soft middle part?”

“Wh-who knows.....?”

“You might want to get rid of that seed from your lip first.”

“Oops.” Jinah pouted at being caught.

Jinwoo giggled at her cute expression and helped her wipe it off, feigning a frown.

“If you take the best part of my melon one more time, I’m gonna make you eat the hard parts of it for every single meal.”

“Awww..... Okay, fine.”

Jinwoo patted his sulking sister on the head and let her go.

Jinah was now in the sixth grade. Having seen her grow up once already, she was adorable in his eyes no matter what she did.

Crunch.

Jinwoo returned to his textbook as he took a bite of melon.

Igris, always concerned about his king’s grades, offered up some advice once again.

“My lord, question twenty-four shouldn’t be approached like that—”

Should I check the answer sheet?

“I shall ponder the question some more, my lord.”

.....

He appreciated Igris's concern, but.....

At least it keeps studying interesting.....

Crunch.

The pieces of melon decreased as he worked through the practice question.

Tick, tock.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed when he felt a sudden chill down his spine.

Huh? Where's this coming from?

Jinwoo bolted up and turned in the direction from which he sensed the strange energy. He then closed his eyes and focused.

.....It wasn't a false alarm. Picturing the worst-case scenario, Jinwoo grimaced.

Where did I put that business card.....?

He searched the pockets of his school uniform and pulled out the business card left by the envoy of the Rulers. He dialed the number, and it quickly connected.

"It has been a while, Shadow Monarch."

Jinwoo ignored the pleasant greeting and cut to the chase, telling him the exact coordinates.

"Is this your doing?"

The envoy was taken aback at the severity of Jinwoo's tone.

"I'm not sure what you are talking about..... Please give me a second."

"....."

The short silence was broken by the envoy's panicked voice.

"I-it's not us. We had no idea until your call. And as you know, our method of transportation is different."

Just as Jinwoo suspected. Thankfully, he could rule out the worst-case scenario, but that didn't mean they were out of the woods.

Something.....or someone is coming to Earth.

At this point, there was no way of knowing the visitor's intent. They could only prepare for every possible outcome.

Jinwoo paused to think before he spoke again.

"Can you come and see me?"

The envoy answered promptly, as if he had been waiting for this very request.

"Of course, right away."

* * *

They met at the café where he'd had a proper conversation with Jinho for the first time in his past life. He arrived on time and discovered the envoy waiting for him at a corner table. Jinwoo pulled up a chair and sat across from him.

The envoy bowed politely upon spotting him. Considering the urgency of the situation, Jinwoo got straight to the point.

"These things trying to come to Earth..... Any idea who they are?"

"They are outsiders who came to our world not too long ago. The army of the sky chased them away, but it looks like they altered course for here."

"Do you know why?"

"They are wicked creatures called Titans, a race of giants who need to consume the rock of habitable planets. I suppose it's obvious why they're coming to Earth."

Jinwoo leaned back in his chair and nodded. ".....So they're not friendly, huh?"

"That is correct."

Now that Jinwoo knew why they were coming, he knew he had to stop them. However, he was curious about one thing.

"This never happened before you guys used the Cup of Reincarnation, right?"

Jinwoo recalled gates and magic beasts but no planet-eating aliens.

The envoy hesitated. "Well, yes, that is correct. Truth be told, when I

mentioned that they invaded our world not long ago, that was from the previous timeline.”

“Are you saying that they were originally supposed to target your world but have changed their minds?”

“Yes.”

The envoy cautiously watched for Jinwoo’s reaction, and Jinwoo knew why.

“This is my fault.”

“They were attracted to your great power... At least, that is what the Rulers have theorized.”

Just as the light from a lighthouse helped sailors find their way on a pitch-black ocean, the Titans had followed the Shadow Monarch and his incredible power to this planet. This was a direct consequence of Jinwoo being in a world that couldn’t handle his power. The Rulers’ concerns were being realized, but they owed Jinwoo too much to simply sit idly by. The envoy made that very clear.

“The Rulers have deployed the army of the sky.”

Jinwoo shook his head. “They’ll be too late.”

Creating a gate alone would take a few years. They’d arrive after everything was over.

“I’ll take care of it.”

Jinwoo and his soldiers would stop them. If the army of the sky was able to defeat the Titans, then Jinwoo was confident he could as well.

The envoy swallowed hard as the forcefulness of Jinwoo’s voice seemed to push down on him. No one would want this man as their enemy. The envoy almost felt bad for the Titans.

But why did Jinwoo want to see the envoy if he didn’t need to request reinforcements from the Rulers?

As if he had read the envoy’s mind, Jinwoo told him, “About that previous offer..... I have an answer for you now.”

“Ah yes, that.”

The Rulers had suggested they send Jinwoo somewhere his mighty power wouldn't affect this world. It appeared as though the current situation had forced Jinwoo to make a decision. The envoy noted the determined look on his face.

“Understood. Then as soon as the Titans are—”

“I'm staying here.”

“.....I beg your pardon?”

The envoy was flustered at Jinwoo's unexpected decision.

Jinwoo spoke softly. “I want to live here.”

Jinwoo wanted to spend the rest of his time in this world with his family, friends, and many other people he wanted to reunite with. This was something he had realized after meeting Detective Jinchul Woo.

It's a bit annoying that he keeps calling me to grab a bite, though.

Either way, Jinchul was a good person. That's why the young detective who also got roped into their meals didn't seem to mind, either.

Jinwoo also wanted to be by their side. He wanted to hang out and laugh with them.

The envoy awkwardly laughed. “To tell you the truth.....I was getting bored here. I'm glad to finally be able to return to my world.”

It had been a year, which could feel like both a long and short while. The envoy's mission to stay on Earth and await the Shadow Monarch's decision was over, as it didn't look like there was any way to change his mind.

“Well then.....”

The envoy beamed as he rose from his seat. He bowed deeply to the great hero who had ended the war between two worlds.

“We leave this world in your hands.”

* * *

Jinwoo cocked his head as he searched his closet.

This isn't good.....

He didn't own any clothes that could conceal his identity, since he no longer needed hoodies or hats to hide the wounds on his face from working as a low-rank hunter. He'd have to make what he needed.

Black smoke wrapped around his body stretched like a liquid before transforming into a hooded jacket like the one he used to favor. Jinwoo pulled the hood up and stood in front of his mirror.

Wow, it's been a while.....

It felt odd to see his past self. The corners of his lips turned up beneath his hood.

"Okay."

He was ready. Jinwoo slowly sank into the shadow underneath his feet.

* * *

In a desert in the western part of the United States, the government had completely sealed off the area as they called in a variety of experts. However, none of them could provide any answers.

"Ummm, well....."

"I've been studying extreme weather conditions for thirty years, but I've never seen anything like this."

None of the scholars could explain the cracks appearing in the atmosphere.

Craaaack!

The cracks were getting wider by the minute.

The US Army had surrounded the area just in case. There were probably enough units here to take over an entire nation.

The commander of these forces reported to the president with confidence. "Whatever comes out of there, we'll take care of it, sir. Yes, yes. It has gotten bigger since it was initially discovered—"

The commander glanced toward the cracked area and discovered a man approaching. The man was wearing a hoodie that covered his face and was

heading straight for the commander.

“Who the hell is that guy? How was he able to enter this area?”

“Is there something wrong?”

“No, Mr. President. I’ll call you back later.” The commander quickly hung up the phone, and he and his aides ran toward the strange man. “Hey, who are you?”

How did a civilian manage to enter a restricted area? The commander was displeased with the situation. Even though he was surrounded by armed soldiers, the strange man showed no signs of fear.

The uninvited guest, Jinwoo, told the commander, “Please withdraw your army. It’s dangerous here.”

The man’s English had an unfamiliar accent.

Is he a foreigner?

The commander frowned and raised his voice to scare off this uninvited guest. “Are you trying to get yourself killed? Don’t you know who’s really in danger here?”

That was obvious to Jinwoo. Realizing he wouldn’t be able to persuade them with words, he decided to reveal some of his power. The commander, his aides, and the soldiers suddenly floated up.

“Huh? Wh-what?”

The commander looked around in a panic. The only person with both feet on the ground was Jinwoo. Not only that, but equipment and vehicles, including heavy tanks, were also clearly floating in the air. The commander’s eyes widened at the impossible situation.

“H-how.....?”

Jinwoo thought that was enough of a show, so he set them down. However, the commander pulled his gun out as soon as he landed. His furious voice echoed throughout the desert.

“Who the hell are you?!”

Jinwoo raised both arms up to his shoulders to show he had no intention of fighting them. “Enemies with a similar power will pour out from those cracks and.....”

Jinwoo snatched the gun from the commander’s hand using mana and made it float right beside his own head. As the gun made its way toward Jinwoo, the nervous soldiers cocked their guns and readied to shoot, but the commander quickly raised his hand to stop them.

“Hold!”

While the commander attempted to calm his soldiers down, Jinwoo pulled the trigger of the gun with an invisible hand.

Bang, bang, bang!

The bullets fell to the ground without even touching Jinwoo’s body. The soldiers looked on in horror, their hearts growing cold.

Jinwoo calmly continued his explanation. “This kind of weapon won’t work on them.”

Finally, Jinwoo’s gaze settled on the flabbergasted commander.

“Do you want to see your soldiers die for nothing?”

“What.....? What should I do?”

“Get your soldiers as far from here as possible. I’ll stay.”

“Are you saying.....you’ll deal with the invaders alone?”

Alone, huh.....? Jinwoo didn’t bother to correct him and nodded.

“.....”

The commander pursed his lips as he debated what to do, then suddenly pulled another gun from his back and fired at Jinwoo.

Bang, bang, bang, bang!

Those bullets also hit Jinwoo and fell uselessly to the ground. The man was a monster, or perhaps a figure out of a myth or legend.

The commander dropped his gun after confirming that the miracle had

happened again. Soon, he turned toward his soldiers and raised his voice so everyone could hear him.

“Everyone, withdraw! Withdraw as quickly as possible!”

The commander’s aides passed on his order to the whole army.

“Withdraw!”

“Withdraw!”

The well-trained army instantly distanced themselves from the battlefield.

Jinwoo watched them leave, then turned toward the cracks in the sky. He could sense the enemies’ desire to consume this land. He could feel them breathing nearby. It had been a while since Jinwoo’s black heart had pounded this hard, warning him of what was coming. With a smile, Jinwoo summoned his daggers from the other dimension.

Kriiiiik.....

Crack!

The sky broke open with an impact that shook the air. The Titans with bodies made of stone set foot on the ground. At their feet, they discovered a small hostile life-form awaiting them. They laughed at Jinwoo.

“What is this? Are you planning to stop us on your own?”

This sensation..... Jinwoo had closed his eyes to savor the silence before battle. He slowly opened his eyes.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

His heart raced as Jinwoo unleashed his strength.

“Did you say, ‘on my own’?”

Ten million shadow soldiers emerged from the shadow dyeing the land black behind Jinwoo.

Good morning...!

.....is what I'd like to say, but the shadow world has no day or night. Instead, I just quietly let out a big yawn when I wake up.

Yawn!

Without a doubt, sleeping in the land of eternal rest is the best. In fact, a lot of soldiers in the shadow army spent the bulk of their time in a deep sleep until our king summons them. I like to sleep as well but unfortunately, I had to get up to take care of an important matter.

The soldiers greeted me when they saw me stretching.

"Hello, sir."

"Hi."

"How are you doing, General Fang?"

"Good, good."

I tried not to show it, but these kinds of moments made me happy. I joined our king's ranks before most of the other soldiers, and thanks to my many achievements, I rose to the position of commanding all the mage soldiers. Ranks in the shadow army are decided by how much our king trusts an individual. That's why the ancient dragons greet me with respect, although I'm a mere high orc shaman.

All hail our king! All hail the great Shadow Monarch!

Indeed.....

I cheered for my king to express my gratitude toward him as usual, then dropped by the ant division feeling proud of myself.

Unlike other shadow soldiers, ant soldiers didn't like to sleep and were always busy doing something. When they saw me in their area, they bowed to me.

"Ha-ha....."

I half-heartedly accepted their greetings and quickly moved along. To be honest, I'm a little scared of the ant soldiers even though they're my comrades. They're the most diligent yet the most violent among all the shadow soldiers.

Skrah!

Skraaaaaah!

I never understood what their roars meant, but it made me flinch every time.

If not Marshal Beru, then I wonder who could possibly control these soldiers.....

Luckily, Marshal Beru soon came out to welcome me as if he had read my mind. His shoulders started to shake as soon as we made eye contact.

“Kee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee.”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh.”

“Kee-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha!”

We shared a laugh together. Judging from Beru’s face, it seemed he was successful. I was excited, since I had been the one to request the thing he was hiding behind his back. He stopped in front of me and whipped it out.

“What do you think?”

I inadvertently sighed in admiration. “Wow!”

Marshal Beru had been kind enough to accept my request for his excellent crafting services and made me a robe similar to the hooded jacket our master used to wear. The garment was finally done.

“Kee-heh-heh-heh-heh!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

I took off the robe I was wearing and immediately tried it on. It was the best! There was no other way to describe it. My voice betrayed just how touched I was.

“I don’t know how I can ever repay you, Marshal Beru.....”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh. How could I ignore your desire to emulate our king? That you like it is enough.”

“I love it. So much so that I’m considering mandating every mage soldier wear

a robe like it.”

“Kee-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh!”

For a time, Beru couldn’t stop laughing. Then he fixed his gaze on something on my person.

“Wouldn’t it be better to make a staff for that so you don’t have to clutch it in your hand.....?”

He indicated the Sphere of Avarice in my right hand.

“Hmm..... Would you be able to make that for me, too, Marshal Beru.....?”

I bashfully handed the Sphere of Avarice to him, but he raised an arm to stop me.

“Magic instruments are beyond me. I would need the expertise of one of the bearded dwarves to help me handle this.”

“Oh.....I see.”

“So how about you ask them to make a staff? Although bearded dwarves are horrible in a battle, their crafting skills are exceptional.”

“.....” I rubbed my chin in thought, then nodded. “That is a good idea, Marshal Beru.”

“Kee-heh-heh-heh-heh!”

I gave Marshal Beru a deep bow of gratitude for the robe and left the area.

I then headed to the area where my friends the dragons lived. I had befriended them during a competition to see who had the greatest firepower. When I explained the situation to my friends, they gladly agreed to help me.

I got on the back of the smallest dragon for no reason other than to save my groin from the pain of straddling a larger dragon with my short legs. Soon, my friend flapped his wings and flew up. I pointed in the direction where the bearded dwarves dwelled.

Since the world of eternal rest was nearly infinite, and nearly ten million soldiers called this their home, some places could be reached only with the help

of my friends.

Flap, flap.

I peeked down and saw tons of soldiers below us.

Over there..... There's the grand marshal.

Hwip, hwip!

"Stand straight, Titans!"

Grand Marshal Bellion was literally whipping the new recruits into shape with his sword that could stretch and be used as a whip. He was having to reeducate the Titans, who had held much power in their own world and were still acting rather uppity.

"Ah!"

Grand Marshal Bellion noticed me and waved, so I quickly bowed my head.

After passing over the reeducation area, I spotted Marshal Igris. He was so focused on his studies that he didn't even realize a dragon was flying overhead. We left the area as quietly as possible so as not to bother him.

Roaaar!

As soon as we passed the Marshals' domains, my friends spread their wings wide and sped up. What a great view! We passed by countless soldiers looking as small as ants below us. Sleeping soldiers, training soldiers, chattering soldiers, gambling soldiers, and arguing soldiers grabbing one another by the collar of various shapes and colors made up the world below.

However, it hadn't always been like this. Since we're psychically connected to our king, we became more like him as his powers grew. In other words, we who had only known destruction had also learned what it meant to be human. Feeling human emotions had been a new experience, and it filled our empty hearts. Now, when his heart beats, ours do as well.

I'm fond of our king, and I'm thankful to him for leading me to a world I could never have imagined.

All hail our king! All hail the great Shadow—

Huh?

In my distracted state, I didn't realize we'd already arrived in the land of the bearded dwarves. They had built a nice village with houses, a forge, and so on, since they like to craft things.

Once my dragon friend landed, I carefully dismounted.

"G-General Fang!"

"General!"

The bearded dwarves nearby came forth and politely bowed to me. They were flustered at a general's visit. I kindly explained the situation to the polite dwarves.

Their elder's face lit up as he responded. "Ohhh..... Please leave it to us. We have been itching to find a use for the sacred timber our lord had bequeathed to us."

"Ah!"

They already had the materials. While I was treated to some warm tea in the elder's house, all the craftsmen assembled to craft my weapon.

"What do you think, General?"

I was thrilled and overcome with emotion as he confidently presented me with a super-cool staff. "Whoaaa!"

The Sphere of Avarice now sparkled sitting atop a staff.

"Nice! This looks fantastic!"

The elder dwarf smiled as I excitedly struck different poses with the staff in my hand.

"The word *fantastic* describes the robe you're wearing more than this staff, General Fang."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You have a good eye for fashion!"

I left the dwarves' dwelling place feeling pleased. They waved good-bye, and I gave them a thumbs-up. If our king ever asks me about this cool staff, I'll make sure to mention the efforts of these dwarves.

I went back the way I had come and arrived at the mages' quarters. I then summoned the mage soldiers to show them my new robe and weapon.

"You look awesome, General Fang!"

"You're the best!"

"I can't stop crying, General Fang!"

No wonder they were praising the items. It was every mage's dream to own a cool robe and staff.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

While sharing this joyful moment with the mage soldiers, I gave my old but luxurious robe to the teary-eyed soldier who had clapped the most.

"Thank you, thank you, General!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

As I patted him on the shoulder, I noticed a couple of unfamiliar faces.

"Who are you?"

The stone giants awkwardly explained. "Grand Marshal Bellion sent us here."

Ah. There were mages among the new soldiers. It seemed like a waste to be casting spells with those massive bodies..... But who was I to talk? Anyway, there was one thing all the new mage soldiers who came under my command had to go through.

"Well then. The rest of you, back to your positions. You two, sit down."

The well-mannered new soldiers carefully knelt on their huge knees.

"Now, I shall regale you with all my accomplishments during the battle between our lord and the horrible Dragon King in the gap between dimensions, so listen carefully....."

After I finished sharing the long and unforgettable history with the new soldiers, I sent the touched newbies away. My day was finally done. I was getting sleepy, so I yawned and lay down.

Yawn!

As much as I appreciate cool clothes, great weapons, and nice stories, I like sleep above all else. I especially like sleep at the end of a busy day like today. I pulled the blanket up to my chin.

But as I gently drifted toward dreamland, someone shook me awake. The nerve! Who would dare wake up General Fang from his precious sleep?! I angrily opened my eyes, ready to kill whoever it was.

“.....?”

It was Marshal Igris.

“Oh, Marshal. I, uh, love you.”

“And I appreciate your loyalty.”

“So.....what brings you here?”

As I sat up, Marshal Igris pointed at the sky. “It’s about to start. Shouldn’t we rank officers, as the soldiers closest to him, cheer him on?”

“Oh!”

I kicked off the blanket and sprang to my feet as I looked up at the sky. Our king’s vision was shared with us in the sky like a huge movie screen.

“Did our master finally meet Miss Haein?!”

“That’s right.”

“Woo-hoo!”

As I let out a cheer at this auspicious moment, the whole shadow army followed by raising their arms and roaring out loud.

Yeaaaaaah!

When our king’s heart beats, our hearts do as well.

I also raised my arms and roared with the other soldiers.

Yeaaah!

My heart was beating as well.

8.

My name is Antares. I am the first Monarch to be born out of darkness. I am also the strongest of the Monarchs, the king of dragons and the symbol of fear and destruction. Indeed, those who know of me call me the Dragon King with respect and admiration.

But one day, as I prepared to invade Earth with ten million soldiers in the gap between dimensions, I opened my eyes and found that I had taken possession of a human vessel.

.....

What's more, I'm not sure how this happened, but I also possessed the human's memories as well. I rushed to the mirror hanging in one corner of a room, and I couldn't help but gasp in shock.

What the—?! Who is this weakling looking back at me?

Oh, how pathetic he was. This human's name was Jinwoo Sung. He was a young E-rank hunter living in a nation called the Republic of Korea. This human seemed to court death quite often because of his unimpressive abilities, yet he refused to quit his job as a hunter.

Because of.....his mother's illness, I see.

I could easily treat that kind of illness with my magic.....is what I was thinking about when the human's phone rang.

Vrr, vrr.

I picked up the small electronic device shaking on the desk to hear the urgent voice of a woman coming from the other side of the device.

“Hunter Sung, what's going on? It's almost time for the raid, but you aren't here yet.....”

When I searched the human's memories for the voice, I landed on an employee of the association.

Hmph.

As I made to hang up the phone that I'd picked up habitually, the woman said

something that caught my attention.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to be late again?”

.....!

Late: the inability to arrive at a promised time. In other words, this woman was asking if I, the Dragon King and an avatar of mighty power, would display incompetence.

I could not stand for that. My eyes were ablaze with indignation.

“Hey.....where are you?”

“What do you mean, ‘where’? In front of the gate, of course. And I have to say, your tone of voice sounded unprofessional just now, Hunter Sung.”

I concentrated on locating the ill-mannered woman. My perception covered the whole of the city, and I soon found her.

“There you are.”

“Sorry? There who.....?”

Click.

It was eleven kilometers away in human terms. Running at full speed, I was able to arrive there within seconds. The association employee was still lowering the phone from her ear when I appeared in front of her.

“Am I late?”

“H-Hunter Sung?”

Frightened, she slowly backed up, perhaps from sensing my seemingly limitless power. I grabbed her by both shoulders to keep her from getting farther.

“Am I late?” I asked again.

“N-no.”

“Good.”

Satisfied, I let go of her shoulders and looked around at the other hunters chattering away. Ignoring them out of disinterest, I focused on the aroma

coming from the paper cups in their hands.

“Coffee..... I want to drink coffee, too.”

When I turned to the association employee, the female turned pale and bowed apologetically.

“I-I’m sorry, Hunter Sung. We ran out of coffee.....”

“No problem.”

“Pardon?”

I snatched the paper cup from the guy closest to me even before he could lift his head.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

Glug, glug.

When I chugged the sweet liquid at once and frowned at him, the flustered man shuddered and ran away.

“Ha-ha!”

Survival of the fittest. That was common sense to us Monarchs. I liked that this was the way with the humans, too.

“There’s.....something odd about Sung, no?”

“His eyes today are somewhat.....”

“He’s giving me the creeps.”

I ignored the whispers coming from the inferior humans behind me.

“Well then, since everyone is here, let’s begin.”

As the hunters began to warm up their bodies for the raid, my gaze shifted to the gate they were supposed to enter.

.....

It looked quite suspicious. The gates appearing on Earth had to originate from the Rulers.....but why did I sense the energy of a Monarch in there? I needed to investigate that. I gave a hawklike glare at the gate and followed the hunters.

“I’m going, too.”

“O-of course, Hunter Sung?”

The hunters, disconcerted by an unnerving chill coming from the gate, and I entered the gate.

* * *

Pow, pow, pow, pow!

The hunters looked upon me with admiration as I took out the decoy magic beasts put here in order to hide the real purpose of this dungeon.

“There’s something really weird about Sung today, isn’t there?”

“No..... Maybe the magic beasts in this dungeon are just extremely weak.....”

“But I can’t even follow Sung’s movements.....”

After clearing the magic beasts in no time, I discovered the suspicious entrance.

“We’ll go this way.”

“Wait, we should vote on what to do in this kind of situa—”

He stopped talking after I knocked him out with a single punch.

Thud.

I looked down at the unconscious old man and then turned to the other hunters.

“Anybody else want to vote?”

“.....”

It was a unanimous decision. We walked down a seemingly endless path and arrived at a huge door.

“What? A door at the end of a cave?”

“Has any lair had a door before?”

“I think this is a first.....”

“Is this.....going to be dangerous?”

The hunters seemed uneasy.

I, too, assessed that the lair was dangerous after detecting a powerful energy coming from deep inside, so I flung open the doors, grabbed the hunter in the lead by their collar, and threw them into the room.

“A-ahhh!”

They thrashed about on the floor, but nothing happened. I finally entered after confirming that it was safe.

The inside resembled an old temple.

“Wh-what is this place?”

The hunters trickled in after me and inefficiently inspected the area. I closed my eyes briefly and concentrated, finding the mastermind behind this place.

“That one.”

The hunters gathered in front of a statue of an angel holding a stone slate that I’d gestured toward.

“It looks like something is written on its slate.”

“Huh? They’re some kind of runes!”

Since none of the hunters understood the runes, I raised my voice and read them out loud.

“The commandments of the Cartenon Temple.”

Someone then tugged at my arm. I turned around to see a woman whose blood had drained out of her face.

“Th-the statue is.....”

“Let go of me.” I shook off her hand and kept reading the stone slate. “First, thou shall worship God. Second, thou shall praise God. Third, thou shall prove thy faith. Those who fail to obey these commandments shall not be spared.”

As if it had been waiting for me to finish, a red beam shot out of the eyes of the gigantic statue sitting in one corner of the temple.

Zzzzzzap!

I didn't even think to avoid or block the beam. Instead, I confidently puffed out my chest and faced the attack.

"Are you looking down on me to use such a weak attack?!"

I sneered at the beam that was weaker than an ancient dragon's breath before showing the statue what true destruction was like.

Hwaaaaah!

Breath of Destruction shot forth from my mouth and easily decapitated the statue.

"That is true power."

That set off the statues standing decoratively against the wall, which ignored the other hunters and came after me at once.

"Mwa-ha-ha-ha!"

Insolent puppets! One by one, I crushed their heads with my bare hands.

Bam! Bam! Crack! Bam!

"Too slow!"

The hunters hit the ground screaming in order to avoid the debris flying everywhere.

"I—I don't think that's right!"

"What's up with those commandments?!"

Most of the statues were reduced to rubble even before the hunters finished their wails. Obviously, it wasn't even much of a warm-up for me.

"Is that it?!"

Seeing its carefully laid plans crumbling down around him, the angel statue holding the stone slate rose and angrily shouted at me. "You bastard! Who the hell are you?"

"Silence!"

I snatched a spear from one of the statues and threw it at the damn angel. In a flash, it penetrated the angel statue's neck, causing it to fall to the ground. I

didn't come here to talk to some decoy. I wanted to see it in the flesh!

"Reveal yourself, you coward!" I roared once I got rid of the obstacles in my way.

The giant headless statue quietly rose to its feet.

Right. This was how it was supposed to be. I grinned as I felt my blood boil. The giant statue stopped right in front of me and peered down.

"Monarch of Destruction, it was our destiny to meet. But our illfated relationship ends now!"

"Oh, excellent idea!"

A black aura swirled around the statue, transforming it into a huge shadow as I released all my power to counter this great energy. It was thrilling.

"Bring it!"

For our war wouldn't end that easily!

* * *

"Gah!" Jinwoo bolted up from his sleep.

There was the familiar bed, wallpaper, ceiling, and computer. He surveyed his surroundings and realized he had woken up in his own room.

Was it a dream?

It was a crappy dream in which he had become the Dragon King, or perhaps the Dragon King had become Jinwoo.

Wait a minute.....

Jinwoo hurriedly checked the time on his cell phone and sighed in relief. There was still plenty of time before the exam.

Now that I think about it.....it's already been four years since I defeated the Dragon King.

Time had flown by quickly, and today was the day of the university entrance exams. His horrendous nightmare was a testament to how nervous he was. Jinwoo had to laugh as he got out of bed.

Today, he'd finally see the results of all his hard work. Jinwoo had his heart set on a particular university because another person he really wanted to meet again would one day attend.

I'm glad you aren't good at school, Jinho.

Jinho Yoo. Jinwoo mulled over the name of the young man he missed dearly as he pulled open the window curtains. Dawn was approaching.

I'll go ahead and wait for you.

He looked forward to their reunion. As he felt the morning breeze come in through the open window, urgent footsteps approached, and his bedroom door opened.

"Honey, you know today's the day, right?"

"Do you want me to drive you, son?"

Jinwoo smiled and nodded at the sight of his parents, who hadn't slept well last night as they fretted over the possibility their son might oversleep and miss the all-important exam.

"I'm coming."

"Let us go, my lord."

Jinwoo walked out of his house as a strangely nervous Igris cheered him on.

It was a brisk morning.

9.

Important people had gathered in the White House of the United States of America.

"....."

The leaders of the nation sitting in the meeting room looked nervous. One of them seemed especially concerned. The United States president rubbed his face as he debated over and over whether he had made the right decision.

The sky opened, and something started to come out of it.

This type of incident had been unheard of until now. Could the government take care of this unprecedented situation without letting its citizens know? Was it even possible to get rid of those things coming out of the rift?

The president, who had been anxiously awaiting word from the person in charge of the matter, sprang up from his seat when General Chester Harrison, the commanding officer of the military in that area, entered the room.

“Harrison, what happened?”

The last report the president had received had been—

“The situation has been resolved. I repeat, the situation has been resolved.”

But there had been no explanation provided on how it had been resolved. That was why the worried leaders had gathered in this room.

General Harrison briefly greeted the president first, looked around, and then walked to the very front of the room.

“It’ll be easier for me to show you this footage than explain things with words.”

He held up a USB. The curious president quickly nodded his assent. The tension in the room was palpable as everyone focused on the little device. Harrison plugged the USB in, and a video began playing on the huge screen on the wall.

“This footage was filmed by drones and electronics at the scene.”

General Harrison gave a brief introduction and then swallowed hard. He couldn’t fathom how the people gathered in this room would react to the video. Harrison himself had watched the video several times and did not know what to think of it.

However, the most important thing about this footage was that it had really happened. The evidence of it was on the USB, and Harrison had a duty to show them as the person in charge of this matter.

The video began with the cracks.

“Oh.....”

“Ah!”

Gasps echoed throughout the room as giants made of rock walked out of the cracks where space itself seemed to shatter. The room would’ve erupted into chaos had they not already received advance reports of these creepy creatures.

But what happened next was more shocking. The giants were horrifying enough that the mere sight of them could give someone a heart attack. Yet there was someone standing in front of them all by themselves.

Judging by the size of their frame.....a young man?

Maybe an Asian?

The Secretary of Defense was unable to restrain himself and angrily pointed at the screen. “That man! Who is that man? Where are all the soldiers, and why is this civilian standing in the middle of those creatures, General Harrison?”

He was right. This wasn’t a recording of the US military’s most elite soldiers defeating the alien creatures as everyone had expected. Instead, the footage featured a man whose face and age were a mystery.

Suddenly, on the screen, shadowy black soldiers rose from the ground.

General Harrison sounded plaintive as he stared at the screen. “.....I would like to know that as well.”

* * *

“Did you think I was alone?”

As per Jinwoo’s command, close to ten million shadow soldiers stood at attention. Several hundred Titans lumbered out of the rifts. Normally, the outcome of such a fight would be obvious, but the problem was that each Titan possessed the strength of higher beings.

Ba-dump, ba-dump!

Jinwoo’s heart raced, since it had been a while since he fought in a war. He signaled to Fang, who commanded the mage soldiers.

You ready?

Yes, my lord.

All the mage soldiers including Fang had been ordered to cast a spell that minimized the damage of the battle. Jinwoo had no choice, since this world was weak due to the severe lack of mana.

These uninvited guests were also likely to hold back from using powerful magic, since their mission was to consume the land. The war about to be waged would inevitably be a physical fight between Jinwoo's army and these enemies—a battle of strength versus strength.

Good.

Luckily, Jinwoo didn't mind that kind of fight. A smirk appeared on his face.

One of the Titans misunderstood Jinwoo's smile and immediately threw a furious punch his way.

Bam!

But his target, Jinwoo, was already in the air. He spryly leaped up as if pole-vaulting and then landed on the Titan's fist as light as a feather.

.....?

The Titan was now stunned by the sight of the smiling human on his hand and felt extremely uneasy. Sure enough, the human then ran up the giant's arm.

Tok, tok, tok, tok!

Jinwoo had already passed the giant's shoulder and was headed for its neck in the blink of an eye. Soon, the dagger in Jinwoo's hand penetrated the Titan's neck.

"Arghhh!"

It was like keying a car. Jinwoo held tightly on to the dagger stuck in the Titan's neck and ran around to the Titan's other shoulder, leaving a line in its wake.

Shhhhhhhhhunk!

The black aura on the tip of the dagger cleanly separated the Titan's neck from its body.

Whud.

Jinwoo stood on the decapitated Titan's shoulder and looked over at its brethren. He could sense their anger, frustration, and fear. It reminded him of how it'd felt hunting the Monarchs one by one in the gap between dimensions. He had succeeded in breaking the Titans' fighting spirit, and his goal now was to annihilate them.

Jinwoo finally mobilized his shadow army.

Soldiers, charge!

He could sense his army begin to move below him.

Raaaaaaaaah!

As their commander, I can't just sit back.

That wasn't the fighting style of the Shadow Monarch. Jinwoo scanned the Titans for his next target. One of the Titans made eye contact with Jinwoo and flinched. The fearful enemy was struck down first.

Jinwoo brandished a dagger brimming with aura as he leaped toward the Titan. It wasn't Kamish's Wrath, but the quality of the weapon didn't matter. He'd honed his control over the black aura over twenty-seven years in battle. The black aura emanating from the tip of Jinwoo's dagger spread out in front of him and split open the face of the frozen Titan.

Shhk!

And just like that, the fearsome Titan lost its life.

But not every Titan was a coward. Jinwoo's eyes widened. Behind the Titan with the split face, other Titans were converging and trying hard to capture him. Jinwoo pushed himself lower in order to escape a huge fist coming straight toward him, then flew back up to avoid the tip of a hand coming in hot from behind. The skill Ruler's Authority had become second nature to him, so Jinwoo was able to move freely through the air.

The enemies' power was beyond his expectations. He kicked away a Titan's fist coming down like a hammer. Then came another Titan's hand coming from one side. Jinwoo quickly brought his arms in and crouched to make himself a smaller target as he braced for impact.

Pow!

Before he could go flying, he used mana to pull the Titan's hand back toward him and slashed at its wrist.

Shhhhk!

The Titan flung its head back as it grabbed its cut wrist.

"Argh!"

Jinwoo quickly maneuvered himself to the Titan's neck and stabbed it near its Adam's apple.

Crack!

The huge body of another Titan was felled by Jinwoo's accurate attack. He launched off this Titan's chest and began severing the hands of other Titans relentlessly coming after him. As Jinwoo jumped into the air to avoid a Titan's hand swinging at him at full strength, he took a good look around him.

Just then, two different Titans slammed him between their shoulders.

Bam!

".....!"

Jinwoo stuck his hands out to keep from getting crushed. He then pushed with all his might and sent them flying with his bare hands.

"Ugh!"

"How is that possible with such a small body?!"

While some Titans were shocked that Jinwoo was physically stronger than they were, one Titan calmly made its move and slammed its palm down like smashing a bug.

"Rahhh!" Jinwoo roared and spat out a powerful amount of mana.

The Titan, flustered as its hand was pushed back, saw the black fist coming right at it too late.

.....?

Ka-pow!

Jinwoo had concentrated the black energy to his right arm and enlarged it to the size of a Titan's arm before knocking the giant's head clean off. Jinwoo eventually wrapped his entire body in a black aura to expand his whole frame before mercilessly going after the Titans. Between the shadow army swarming around like ravenous beasts and the Titans made of stone, the outcome was quickly decided.

In the middle of Titans that had been brought to their knees stood the giant shadow, ripping a Titan's arm clean off and crushing it to dust with its bare hands.

Craaaack!

The Titans surrounding Jinwoo were shocked by his power and retreated a few steps back.

.....?

Puzzled, Jinwoo gazed at them in suspicion, only for a Titan larger and seemingly stronger than the others to approach him.

"Ah....." The voice, however, came from a little creature perched on the Titan's shoulder. "I see that even this tiny planet on the outskirts of the universe has its gifts."

It was a small, humanoid version of the stone Titans.

"But enlarging your body in order to maximize your power is evidence that your race is still savage. On the other hand, we, the Titans, decrease our size like this when we reveal our full power." It laughed as it gestured to itself. "Ha-ha! Naturally, only the best warriors such as I can do this....."

Jinwoo listened to him, unamused. Suddenly, he turned his head to one side.

Flash!

In the nick of time, Jinwoo avoided a beam of red light that shot out from behind him and instantly disintegrated the best warrior of the Titans. The red light came from a panicking Bellion astride an ancient dragon.

"Oh dear, were you in the middle of conversation with it, my lord?"

Jinwoo waved his hand to indicate that it was okay. "These guys are quite

arrogant. So I'll let you take care of them."

"Please leave it to me, my lord." Bellion bowed his head and flew off.

Jinwoo looked at the Titans again. He had already defeated quite a lot of them, and the rest were being swept up by a black wave of shadow soldiers.

"Argggghhhh!"

"Gah!"

The screams of the rock giants filled the desert.

* * *

"....."

"....."

Dead silence. That was the only way to describe the atmosphere of the room. It was so quiet; it was like everyone had frozen into blocks of ice.

The United States president struggled to find the right words to say after watching the footage. "That man..... Have you learned his identity?"

The general shook his head. The true monster had destroyed the horrifying creatures like they were toys and saved the United States without a single civilian noticing.

In fact, he probably saved the entire world.....

Yet the kind of power that could save the whole world could also destroy it. The president concluded that uncovering the mystery man's identity was a priority.

"Is there any way to find out who this man in the video is?"

While some suggestions were offered, the room generally believed this to be an impossibility. However.....

"It's impossible, realistically speaking. Emphasis on the 'realistically.'" It was David Brannon, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The president turned his head toward Brannon. ".....What are you saying?"

The director proceeded with caution. "If it's impossible realistically speaking,

then how about an unrealistic approach?”

When the others blinked at him in confusion, Brannon smiled.

“There is a way. There is a person who has told us things impossible to have known through realistic methods.”

Could he mean.....?! There was a woman known by every single person living in the United States whose special relationship with the CIA was a well-known secret.

The president’s eyes widened. “Do you mean.....?”

Director Brannon confidently nodded. “Yes, Mrs. Norma Sellner. I’m sure she’ll once again have the answer we’re looking for.”

* * *

A black sedan slowed as it arrived in front of a cozy house with a red roof in a suburban residential area. Director Brannon of the CIA and two of his subordinates exited the car.

Brannon glanced at the house and gave an order. “You guys, wait here.”

“Director Brannon.....”

The subordinates hesitated at the difficult order, as they were there to protect him, but the director was stubborn.

“It’s fine, it’s fine.” Brannon waved them away. “Mrs. Sellner likes to keep things low-key.”

The director left his subordinates next to the car and walked toward the house alone. He took a second to straighten his outfit, then cautiously knocked on the door.

“Mrs. Sellner, it’s me. It’s Da—”

A child opened the door before he could complete his sentence. Director Brannon recognized Mrs. Sellner’s grandson and crouched down to be eye level to him. He patted the kid on the head.

“Is your grandmother home?”

“She’s been waiting for you, Mr. Mustache.”

As the boy pointed at him, Brannon chuckled.

Of course she was. After all, she was a psychic, a prophet, an esper, and the best fortune teller in the world.

That wasn't to say Brannon had always trusted her, but after witnessing her supernatural powers solve difficult cases even the CIA had given up on, he'd had no choice but to believe. She was the real deal.

A true superhuman.....

It was probably easier for Mrs. Sellner to predict a visit from an unannounced visitor than it was for her to change the TV channel with a remote.

Brannon followed the child into the living room and politely greeted her as she put her cup of tea down on the table.

"It has been a while, Mrs. Sellner."

"Welcome, Dave."

It had been about a year ago since his last visit, but the living room hadn't changed. He slowly took a seat on the couch.

"You probably can't imagine how hard our job has been since you retired, Mrs. Sellner."

As valuable as information of the past could be, it couldn't hold a candle to information of the future. It had been a huge loss for the CIA when Mrs. Sellner stopped working for them. The director's tone was joking, but he couldn't hide his wistfulness.

Mrs. Sellner admonished him as if he was a child whining for a cookie. "I've already told you, Dave. I've been unable to see anything from the future since his visit."

"Ah....."

Was she talking about the god of death again? Brannon bitterly smacked his lips at the same response she'd given so many times before. According to her, she had been rendered powerless as a result of a mighty power appearing in this world. Director Brannon never knew how to respond to that, as he couldn't fathom why she would quit working with the CIA.

“.....”

An awkward silence fell over them. Smelling some food in the air, the director broke the tension.

“Were you in the middle of a meal, Mrs. Sellner?”

Mrs. Sellner shook her head. “Actually, I have another guest.”

“Oh..... Is that so?”

It was surprising that Mrs. Sellner, who wasn't fond of meeting others, had another guest.

Brannon decided to get down to business and wiped the smile from his face. “Then I'll cut to the chase so I don't take up much more of your time.”

Mrs. Sellner was already fully aware of what he was about to ask. “My answer to your first question is ‘yes,’ and my answer to your second question is ‘no.’”

“Wait.....”

Mrs. Sellner grinned at the flustered director. “Are you wondering how I knew what you were going to ask even though I can no longer see into the future?”

“.....Yes.”

“You already chose your questions in the past, Dave. I simply put my answers together by looking at the past.”

“Ohhh.....” Brannon groaned quietly and nodded.

“Shall I elaborate now?”

The director took out a handkerchief and dabbed his forehead. “Go ahead, Mrs. Sellner.”

“Yes, Dave. I do indeed know the identity of the man you seek.”

Her answer to his first question was yes. But her answer to his second question was no.

“However, I shall not tell you anything about him.”

“Mrs. Sellner!” The director's voice grew louder out of frustration. “I'm sure you're aware of what that man has done! We can't just let him get away

with—”

Mrs. Sellner snapped at him. “That is exactly why I will not tell you!”

That had never happened before. Director Brannon didn’t know how to react at seeing her angry for the first time.

However, Mrs. Sellner wasn’t done. “Are your eyes just for decoration?”

“Excuse me?!”

“Didn’t you see the video on the USB, Director Brannon?”

“.....”

Brannon had plainly seen that man stand up to those terrifying monsters on his own. The man possessed a horrifying amount of power, but he had saved humanity.

“What if I told you that was not the first time such an event occurred?”

Mrs. Sellner seemed to be completely serious, so Brannon froze.

“.....”

Not the first time? The thought of humankind not knowing it had been on the brink of extinction before gave him chills. But when he thought about it, he realized that only a small handful of United States government personnel had been privy to this incident. It was totally possible a similar situation could have occurred elsewhere in the world that they were unaware of.

He could be as she claims.....

Director Brannon rubbed his chin in thought. “I trust you, Mrs. Sellner.”

Although he had only known her for about three years, it felt like Brannon had known Mrs. Sellner for much longer than that, so he had an unshakable faith in her for reasons even he couldn’t describe.

When she nodded, he cautiously asked her another question.

“The man in the video..... Can you swear that he doesn’t pose a threat?”

She responded without hesitation. “I swear.”

The director nodded slowly and came to a decision. “Understood. I’m going to

pretend like you don't know that man."

With a bittersweet look on his face, Brannon got up from his seat. "Well then."

He said his good-byes and turned to leave, but Mrs. Sellner's warm voice stopped him.

"Dave, I baked some cookies. Would you like one for the road?"

"Um....." Gazing at the bag of cookies in her hand, the director declined her offer with a smile. "No, thank you, Mrs. Sellner."

Now that official business was over, Brannon looked more relaxed. Mrs. Sellner smiled warmly at him and called out to her grandson to see him out. Having taken a liking to Mr. Mustache, the child promptly showed up and took Brannon by the hand.

"I'll be seeing you, Mrs. Sellner."

"Bye-bye, Dave."

As the director let himself be led out by Mrs. Sellner's grandson, the guest hiding on the other side of the living room wall walked back into the room.

"I don't like that old man, Granny. Want me to take care of him?"

The big guy with slicked-back blond hair took a handful of cookies from the bag Brannon had rejected and stuffed them into his mouth.

"If you cause any more trouble, you'll be suspended from the league, won't you, Thomas?"

Thomas awkwardly laughed and chewed the cookies.

Crunch, crunch.

"Eh, well....."

It was Thomas Andre, UFC heavyweight champion and one of Mrs. Sellner's few friends, though that fact was unbeknownst to the general public. If reporters found out, they'd have a field day.

Thomas looked as at home in Mrs. Sellner's house as if he was visiting an aunt's place. Still unsatisfied after polishing off the cookies, he snatched the bag

from her to shake the crumbs into his mouth.

“Granny, can I ask you something?”

As Mrs. Sellner smiled and nodded at him, Thomas crumpled the empty bag into a ball.

“A lot of people die from accidents.”

Many died from car accidents—except those who got a call from Mrs. Sellner. It had been his first day off in a while, and Thomas had planned to take his beloved sports car out for a spin, but he was lucky enough to receive one such call. When he checked, he found that one of his wheels had a nail stuck in it. Without her warning, he would’ve surely gotten into a deadly car accident.

In other words, Mrs. Sellner was Thomas’s savior. Ever since then, the two had grown close enough to share meals like this. But one thing had always remained a mystery.

“Why did you save me?”

It wasn’t like she’d been desperate to save him because she was a fan of the UFC. Thomas had always been curious as to why Mrs. Sellner had initially called him.

“.....” At his question, she stared at the now-athlete’s face in silence for a while before answering. “It’s because you did many good things in your previous life.”

“.....I did?”

Thomas Andre was called the “bad boy” or even “devil” of the UFC. For a moment, he wondered if she had eaten something bad, but he kept his initial response to himself out of respect for his savior.

“Ha-ha!” Mrs. Sellner laughed, then shifted her gaze to watch the director get into his car outside the window. Her grandson waved at Mr. Mustache until he couldn’t see the car anymore.

Relationships. Mrs. Sellner considered it destiny that relationships from their previous life continued in life whether by design or not.

After making sure the coast was clear, Thomas plopped on the couch where

Director Brannon had been seated earlier. “So what did the man do in the footage? Why are they looking for him?”

Mrs. Sellner spoke casually, as if she was talking about the laundry. “He saved the world.”

“.....”

Thomas couldn’t tell if Mrs. Sellner was joking or not.

Though this is why it’s fun to be around her.

Thomas put on the sunglasses he usually wore and asked her another question. “Then what is the hero who saved the world doing now?”

Mrs. Sellner smiled to herself as she watched her grandson return inside. “Who knows.....? Perhaps he’s enjoying his youth somewhere.”

* * *

Yeaahhh!

Cheers rang out at the qualifying round of the National Track-and-Field Student Athlete Competition. There were sparks in the eyes of the team captains as two rival schools ran into each other.

“Hey, Taewoong! You must be desperate to put a freshman in every event.”

Kisuk Jo, the captain of the track-and-field team of Hwasung Tech High School, taunted Jinwoo’s team. The two schools were longtime rivals.

“Sangin takes a break for a few months and now your worthless team is relying on a freshman?”

Taewoong patted Jinwoo’s shoulder as he sneered at Kisuk’s continuous jibes. “This freshman is going to make you eat your words.”

“Ha! At least your sense of humor is better than your record.”

Jinwoo was troubled as he observed their argument.

They’re making it harder for me to lay low.....

Kisuk’s confidence grew as he caught Jinwoo’s frown. “You know, this is quite a coincidence.”

He gestured at his team members, and the confident big guy standing at the back of the group strode forward.

“We have a pretty monstrous rookie, too.”

Jinwoo recognized the rookie’s face and inadvertently let out a gasp. “Huh?”

“Looks like your freshie’s feeling the heat, isn’t he?”

The rival rookie was more muscular than any high schooler around. Kisuk put his hand on the rookie’s shoulder and loudly introduced him.

“Meet Hwasung Tech High School’s secret weapon: freshman Chul Kim.”

* * *

An overwhelming impulse, so powerful that all rationality flew out the window, engulfed Chul.

Wh-why do I feel like.....?

Why did Chul want to kneel in front of a student his age he was meeting for the first time in his life? If he hadn’t put all his energy into locking his ankles and calves, he would’ve embarrassed himself in front of everyone, but it was a close call. He wiped the cold sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand.

Then a thought hit him.

No way..... Am I afraid of a dude in the same grade as me?

How else could Chul explain why his breathing got faster, he instinctually avoided eye contact, and he felt weak in the knees? But he couldn’t bring himself to believe this.

Yeah, right!

Chul Kim boasted an extraordinary, huge physique for a high school student, and he’d stood out because of it since middle school. So why on earth would he be scared? It made no sense, and he refused to acknowledge that it was happening.

“Chul, what’s wrong?”

“Are you not feeling well?”

At his upperclassmen’s worry, Chul firmly replied.

“I’m completely fine!”

Right. There was nothing wrong with him. Chul nodded like he was trying to convince himself.

I’m probably just feeling dizzy because I didn’t have enough to eat for breakfast.

To prove this to himself, Chul slowly raised his head and looked directly at the freshman from the rival school. He was fit for a freshman but still a beanpole compared to Chul.

Chul finally relaxed and smirked.

.....*See?*

How could he be intimidated by someone he could potentially send flying with one punch? There was absolutely no way for him to be. Chul straightened his shoulders, his arrogant expression from before returning. The track team from Hwasung Tech High School had been worried by Chul’s sudden mood swing, but they were relieved to see that he was fine now.

“You scared me there for a minute.”

“Who knew our freshman was such a good actor?”

Chul accepted the pats of encouragement from his team and then fixed his gaze on Jinwoo.

That was freaking humiliating. Why did I have to get dizzy right when I made eye contact with him.....?

Chul mulled over how to get back at the other freshman. The best way would be to assert his dominance.

.....

Considering how the other freshman seemed to be glaring at him, he shouldn’t let him get away with something like that.

“Hey!” Chul deepened his voice on purpose and pointed to the other end of the field. “I have something to say to you, so come with me.”

Ohhh!

The Hwasung Tech High School track team egged on their feisty freshman. Meanwhile, Jinwoo's team scrambled to stop him from following Chul.

"Murder is prohibited, Jinwoo!"

"Control yourself! You can't spill blood on a competition day!"

"Think of it as saving someone's life!"

Smiling, Jinwoo shook free of their hold. "Relax. Nothing's going to happen."

The team looked him over for reassurance.

"You sure? You're not going to do anything, right?"

"We trust you, okay?"

"We're going to be watching to make sure that guy walks back on his own two feet."

Jinwoo laughed and nodded to calm them down and hurried to catch up to Chul.

.....

Kisuk had been watching their entire interaction. He looked incredulous as he approached them.

"Are you guys serious.....?"

Taewoong glanced at Kisuk and then worriedly gazed in the direction Jinwoo had gone. "Don't talk to me. I'm not in the mood now."

Taewoong had seen up close how incredibly athletic Jinwoo was, and he desperately prayed that Chul Kim wouldn't cross the line.

* * *

As Jinwoo made his way to the other side, he found himself looking forward to what Chul had to say. Had Chul also regained his memories of their previous life? If so, how would the human Chul Kim react to his memories of being Iron the shadow soldier?

However, based on Chul's expression, that didn't seem to be the case.

"Hey, you." Chul gave him a murderous glare. "You think you can look down

on me because we're both wearing uniforms and standing on the same field?"

Although Chul was angry, Jinwoo grinned inadvertently, as it reminded him of how Chul had fumed inside the red gate. He had annoyed Jinwoo back then, but it was all in the past, wasn't it?

Meanwhile, Chul, who did not share the same memories, did not find Jinwoo's grin the least bit amusing.

"You son of a—!" Chul grabbed Jinwoo by the collar.

Raaaaaah!

As he did, Jinwoo's shadow soldiers roared.

"Iron! He's joining us again!"

"Welcome back, Iron!"

"My lord, please leave him to me. I, Bellion, will reeducate him so that this doesn't happen again....."

.....

Apparently, Jinwoo needed to teach the shadow soldiers how to adjust to civilized society.

Jinwoo sucked his teeth and looked into Chul's eyes. Despite Chul picking a fight, Jinwoo couldn't bring himself to hate him as he'd been fond of Iron, a loyal shadow soldier. Rather, Jinwoo was rather curious whether Chul would regain his memories if they made physical contact.

.....

Chul swallowed nervously as he sensed something in the depths of Jinwoo's eyes.

What is this.....?

Normally, Chul would've just punched someone who made fun of him, competition be damned. But instead of feeling anger toward this opponent or wanting to seek revenge, he felt a deep tug at his heart. Suddenly, Jinwoo gently wrapped his hand around the hesitant Chul's wrist. As soon as he did...

"Huh.....?"

Inexplicable tears poured like rain from Chul's eyes. His legs gave out, and he plopped down on the ground.

"Why.....?"

Chul looked up at Jinwoo. His eyes were begging for an answer, but Jinwoo could only smile wistfully.

Even with physical contact, I guess his memories won't return, since he didn't share the Monarch's memories in the past.

Jinwoo would have to purposefully restore those memories. Jinwoo recalled the people who had shared his memories during the deleted past.

President Jinchul Woo and.....

Mrs. Norma Sellner. Jinwoo turned to leave, suspecting that Mrs. Sellner might have the memories from the time before. Since Chul Kim was no longer the shadow soldier Iron, Jinwoo didn't have any business with him.

Chul called out to Jinwoo before he could get very far. "H-hang on..... Wait."

Chul quickly got up as he wiped tears from his face. Although he had stopped crying, the tip of his nose was red. As Jinwoo turned back, he spoke with a sob.

"Is this.....what people call love?"

He had never experienced such overwhelming emotion before and was conflating that feeling with love.

"....." Jinwoo could only stare at the unexpected question before letting out a deep sigh. ".....Oh geez."

Jinwoo couldn't leave Chul with such a huge misunderstanding, right? As Jinwoo approached, Chul blushed.

Snap!

With a snap of Jinwoo's fingers, Chul's face smoothed out and his eyes lost focus. Jinwoo stood in front of him and planted fake memories in his mind.

"Okay, so.....you picked a fight with me, but then you found out I was your father's friend's friend's friend's son, so we're cool now."

Chul nodded in a daze.

“And.....”

Jinwoo smiled gently as he recalled the weeping Iron as they bade him farewell, just before he used the Cup of Reincarnation.

“From now on, you should behave yourself. Be proud that you were someone who fought to save the world.”

“.....Yes.”

After Chul replied, Jinwoo released him from the hypnotic hold.

Snap!

“H-huh.....?”

Chul regained consciousness and looked around in confusion. He spotted Jinwoo walking away from him, who waved back at him like they were old friends who hadn’t met in a while.

“See you next time!”

“Uh..... Sure.” Chul waved back and smiled at Jinwoo, too.

Good.

Pleased, Jinwoo went on his way. With the unexpected reunion with an old colleague behind him, it was time to search for the person he’d actually come here for.

As if on cue, an announcement echoed across the field.

“The preliminary round for middle school students will begin shortly. All athletes, please report to the field.”

* * *

On the backside of the field away from prying eyes, a girl hobbled over to the shade of a tree and then plopped down on the ground. With shaky hands, she took off a shoe and pulled down her sock. Her ankle was badly swollen. She bit her lip as she stared at her ankle, then closed her eyes and leaned her head against the tree.

It had been an accident. A sprinter running beside her had bumped her shoulder, and she’d landed on her foot the wrong way. Though she’d somehow

made it through the preliminary round despite the serious injury, participating in the following rounds would be impossible.

Dammit.....

She was frustrated. This could be her last middle school competition, and she didn't want it to end with an injury.

So.....

She made the irresponsible decision to continue to run with her leg in this condition. From the dawn of time, children have always needed adults to steer them down the right path.

"Are you trying to hide the fact that you're injured?"

A boy noiselessly walked out from the other side of the tree, startling the girl.

The boy looked off in the distance. "I know someone else who ran with an ankle injury and then had to spend more than a year in recovery. They ended up a run-of-the-mill athlete and regretted the decision for the rest of their life. You still thinking of doing it?"

The girl stared at the boy with wide eyes. He looked down at her and smiled.

"It's the story of someone I know."

What a strange person with a strange story. But instead of leaving, Haein Cha looked him over.

A track-and-field athlete.....? Is he in high school?

There was a nice scent coming from here. In the far-flung future, she would discover that it was the smell of pure mana radiating from Jinwoo and that she had a special ability to detect mana with her sense of smell.

Jinwoo crouched down by the bewildered Haein to gently touch her swollen ankle.

"Ah....." Haein winced a little bit but didn't resist much.

When Jinwoo took his hand off her ankle, the injury was gone. Haein whipped her head around to stare at him in shock.

"Run with no regrets. You only get one shot."

Haein had shone when she battled magic beasts as an S-rank hunter, and she shined just as much now, sweating under the spring sun. As Jinwoo grinned and made to stand up, Haein hurriedly grabbed his wrist.

“W-wait.”

“.....?”

Did their physical contact have another effect by chance? Haein blushed a little bit when she met Jinwoo’s curious gaze.

“Um, have we.....met somewhere before?”

She had to muster up all her courage just to ask him that question. The back of her neck turned red in the process.

“Running.”

“What?”

Jinwoo chuckled as she became flustered. “Run against me. Beat me at least once, and I’ll answer you.”

“.....I’m pretty sure I saw you finish first place in every preliminary round.”

Jinwoo smirked. “So you give up?”

“O-okay then.....!” Haein mustered up her courage once more. “Whatever your time is in the final heat..... If I beat it, will you answer me?”

Jinwoo tried to hide his laugh.

She’s as innocent as she used to be.

Jinwoo briefly entertained the thought of breaking the world record at this student competition before nodding in agreement.

“Sure.”

Haein smiled brightly at successfully securing the deal.

She won’t be smiling later, though.

Jinwoo turned away from Haein and headed to the track. On this sunny spring day, the world record for male high school students in track was shattered, and Jinwoo’s team successfully won first place after defeating their rival, Hwasung

Tech High School.

* * *

Since he hadn't shared his memories with them directly, Jinwoo forgot that there were a few more people who had connected with higher beings in their previous life. And one of them was very lucky to have made direct contact with Jinwoo, a higher being himself.

Early in the morning.....

"What's the matter, son?"

Ilhwan moved to place his hand on his son's shoulder when he emerged from his bedroom in tears. As soon as he did, his past life flashed in front of his eyes. Though it lasted for a couple of seconds, the moment contained an eternity.

"I did want to see you... This whole time."

"I'd like to talk to you more, but....."

"I'm so sorry that I wasn't a good father."

As that last scene played out, Ilhwan's heart sank.

Then the footage seemed to play backward and restart at the beginning of the new timeline, like someone had pressed rewind. This was possible only because of the Cup of Reincarnation.

Ilhwan, who had known of the existence of the cup thanks to the memories of the Rulers, realized by the look on Jinwoo's face that some kind of deal had been struck between his son and the Rulers. And Jinwoo had decided to take on the burden, no matter how steep the price.

Ilhwan bit down hard on his lip to keep his emotions in check. It seemed that his efforts had paid off, as Jinwoo wiped the tears from his eyes and smiled.

".....I think I had a nightmare."

Ilhwan noted the strong determination on Jinwoo's face. But in that moment, or even when Jinwoo suddenly disappeared leaving only a note, Ilhwan could have never imagined what kind of promise his son had made with the Rulers.

* * *

".....To think that promise was to defeat the whole army by himself."

Ilhwan could only laugh at the absurdity of it all. If he had known the details of the promise before Jinwoo left for the gap between dimensions, would he have stopped his son or let him go for the sake of the world?

“Yet he pulled it off marvelously, no?” The envoy of the Rulers smiled brightly from the seat across from Ilhwan.

Ilhwan pursed his lips but nodded in agreement. Thanks to Jinwoo’s sacrifice, this world had avoided a devastating war. Yet Ilhwan was unable to smile as he thought about the pain and suffering his son must have endured.

Jinwoo had returned from the gap between dimensions about a year ago.

“My son.....”

Ilhwan’s reluctant voice trailed off and was drowned out by the low music playing in the café. The envoy sipped his coffee through a straw and waited for him to continue.

“What has my son decided to do?”

“The Shadow Monarch.....”

The envoy smiled softly as he took note of Ilhwan’s nervousness.

“.....has decided to remain. He considers every second he spends here to be precious.”

Ilhwan let out a long sigh of relief.

The envoy finished his coffee and gently set down his cup. With Jinwoo’s decision made, his assignment here was done. It was time for him to leave. Ilhwan would probably be the last human he would interact with before returning to his own world. Perhaps that was why he wanted to make their conversation last, despite not being a very talkative individual.

“Are you going to keep hiding this from the Shadow.....I mean, your son?”

“Since he doesn’t want anyone to remember.....”

If Jinwoo wanted a normal family life, Ilhwan was more than happy to put on an act for him.

“Like father, like son.” The envoy nodded. “Once I leave this planet, the Rulers

will no longer interfere with this world.”

“I know.”

“Then this really is the end.....” The envoy sounded emotional as he looked around the café. “It has been fun. I was really looking forward to the return of the Shadow Monarch and the subsequent result while he was gone.”

He didn’t mention that the Rulers had expected Jinwoo to fail. There was no need to ruin the moment in the middle of a good-bye.

Before the envoy left, he told Ilhwan, “The Rulers are thankful not only to the Shadow Monarch but to you as well, Mr. Sung.”

The outcome might have been different if not for Ilhwan’s help. He had fought for the Rulers and advised them to cooperate with the Shadow Monarch, so his contribution to this battle couldn’t be ignored. As such, the Rulers wanted to reward him.

“By any chance, is there a way we can assist you?”

Considering the mighty powers and tools the Rulers possessed, the envoy was basically offering to grant Ilhwan any wish.

However, Ilhwan shook his head. “No, nothing.....”

The envoy understood where Ilhwan was coming from. What help could they offer when someone in his family possessed godlike powers?

“Well then.....”

The envoy bowed his head to Ilhwan and made to stand up when Ilhwan belatedly spoke.

“Wait.”

The envoy sat down again. “Is there anything else.....?”

Ilhwan briefly debated something before continuing with difficulty. “My memories..... Can you erase my memories from the previous timeline?”

“Of course, but why would you choose to do that.....?”

“I’m afraid my son is too quick to catch on, so it’ll be hard for me to fool him.” Ilhwan chuckled.

Like father, like son. Ilhwan's smiling face resembled Jinwoo's.

"Plus....." Ilhwan looked down as he slowly continued. "Well, I just want to be a normal dad who looks out for his son."

Ilhwan wanted to be a normal dad who felt anxious that his son could get hurt or relieved about exam results.

"Jinwoo isn't the Shadow Monarch to me. He is my beloved son."

That was Ilhwan's small wish.

"I see."

If that was what Ilhwan wanted..... The envoy was glad to do him this favor.

"Once you leave this café, everything that happened in the deleted timeline will be completely erased from your mind." As the envoy cast a magic spell, he said good-bye to Ilhwan in a low voice the human likely couldn't hear. "You won't remember this, but I hope you have a peaceful life."

Time passed, and it became winter. One morning, Ilhwan woke up with a start from the alarm that rang at six o'clock. His wife woke up next to him at the same time, and they exchanged looks.

"What about Jinwoo?"

"What about Jinwoo?"

The couple hurriedly checked the time and were relieved to see it was only six in the morning.

"What should I do, hon? Should I wake Jinwoo up now?"

"There's still time before the exam. Let him sleep a little longer."

"Sounds good. And I can drive him to the exam center anyway."

"Seven o'clock..... Let's wake him up at seven."

Ilhwan nodded at his wife's suggestion. They nervously kept their eyes on the clock and ran out of the room as soon as it hit seven o'clock. They opened the door to Jinwoo's room.

"Honey, you know today's the day, right?"

“Do you want me to drive you, son?”

Jinwoo looked like he had just woken up. He answered with a smile. “I’m coming.”

As Jinwoo came out of his room, Ilhwan quickly changed his clothes and grabbed the car keys. His key ring, a gift from Jinwoo, caught his eye. There was a smile on Ilhwan’s face as he admired the handmade key ring in the shape of a white castle with a black flag on top of it.

It was a brisk morning, the sun shining to usher in a brand-new day.

* * *

It was Christmas Eve, and Jinwoo walked down a busy street that was all decked out for the festivities. Everywhere he looked, he was greeted with the faces of popular entertainers and star athletes on a variety of advertisements.

This street has changed a lot.

He felt disoriented whenever he thought back to a time when it was the faces of hunters plastered up and down the street instead of these celebrities. A familiar face on an ad for a sports drink had him bursting into laughter. Jinwoo wondered how many people had done their best to draw out the natural expression in this picture.

A track star, huh.....?

The smile on Haein’s face in the ad was indisputably of star caliber. Her impressive records had eventually caught the attention of the media, so the track-and-field association begged Haein to help boost the popularity of the sport.

When she was an S-rank hunter, she refused to set foot in front of the camera, but now she’s a superstar athlete.....

None of this would have happened had Jinwoo not healed her injury. He was quite pleased with this outcome. Although Haein still felt awkward in front of the camera, she’d get better at it over time.

With that, Jinwoo headed to the meeting place. As he scanned his surroundings, he noted the stylish outfits of the couples out on dates.

I literally look like someone who just dragged themselves out from taking a university entrance exam.

Jinwoo grimaced at his boring outfit and searched for a clothing store. The store was already closed, but Jinwoo hadn't been interested in buying clothes anyway. He stood in front of the best-dressed mannequin in the store window.

Hwoosh.

Black smoke wrapped around Jinwoo's body and quickly transformed his clothes into the same ones on the mannequin. He checked out his reflection in the store window and polled his shadow soldiers.

"How do I look?"

The fashion-conscious Fang hurriedly answered him. "You look excellent, my lord."

"Good."

There was a spring in Jinwoo's step as he arrived at the meeting place.

A huge Christmas tree stood in the middle of the plaza. Many people stood nearby, waiting on family, friends, or lovers. Even as they anxiously checked their watches, everyone looked happy. Perhaps because it was Christmas Eve?

Unlike those around him, Jinwoo was relaxed as he quietly looked at the sky. Despite all the noise, Jinwoo was able to pick up on the footsteps of the person he was there to meet.

.....Three, two, one.

Jinwoo turned at just the right time as she approached him from behind. "Hey."

Haein, who had been planning to take him by surprise and cover his eyes, lowered her hands.

"Do you have eyes in the back of your head?"

Jinwoo giggled, as he thought Haein's disappointed expression was adorable. She pulled her hood down low the way he used to in order to avoid the attention of other people.

“Want to walk around for a bit?” Haein smiled brightly at this suggestion and nodded.

Every time they hit a fork in the road, they chose to avoid the crowds.

When Jinwoo shared his university exam score with Haein, her eyes went wide. “So why not go to a better university?”

“Because of the full scholarship and the chance to study abroad. Plus, there’s someone I really want to meet over there.”

Haein’s eyes narrowed. “Is that someone a woman, by any chance?”

Jinwoo took his time answering to tease her. “Well.....”

Haein pouted. Having met Haein when they were both already adults, Jinwoo loved seeing these sides of her that he’d never seen in the previous timeline.

Plip.

Something cold to the touch landed on Jinwoo’s nose. It was a snowflake. When he looked up, white dots were falling from the night sky. It was going to be a white Christmas.

The quiet snow drifting down reminded Jinwoo of the gray ash falling after he had defeated the Dragon King.

“What’re you thinking about, Jinwoo?”

Jinwoo shrugged it off with a smile. “Nothing.”

He couldn’t share that he was thinking about his greatest nemesis as he watched snow fall from the night sky on Christmas Eve.

Although she wasn’t sure what was on his mind, Haein grinned. “Jinwoo, do you remember your promise?”

“What promise?”

“You promised that you’d answer whatever question I had if I beat you in a race.”

“Oh, right, I remember.”

Haein pointed at a tree a short distance down the street. “Race you there?”

Jinwoo was amused by her spontaneous challenge. “Why? What did you want to ask me?”

“Everything.”

“Everything?”

“I want to know what’s on your mind, whether it’s a woman you want to meet at that university, and.....”

“And?”

“And whether we’d met somewhere else before the track meet?”

“.....Fine.”

Jinwoo agreed and took his hands out of his pockets. Keeping them in his pockets wouldn’t change the outcome, but he wanted to show Haein that he was taking this seriously.

Just then, Haein took a step closer toward Jinwoo and wrapped the scarf she was wearing around his neck.

“If you like me, don’t take another step.”

“Huh?”

Jinwoo was flustered as Haein started walking slowly toward the tree, keeping her eyes on him. He couldn’t do anything but laugh as he realized he had lost the bet from the start.

“Oh geez.....”

Haein eventually touched the tree and celebrated victory by hopping lightly on the spot. The shadow soldiers who had been excitedly monitoring the bet went nuts.

“Whoa! Our king lost!”

“I didn’t know that was possible!”

“My lord, you made a mistake!”

“Skraaah! My king! You can still make it...!”

Jinwoo glanced at their surroundings as he walked toward the tree.

Fortunately, there was no one else on the street.

“I won, right?” Haein’s eyes sparkled with excitement as she awaited Jinwoo’s answer.

He stopped in front of her and gave an order to his soldiers.

Shadows, close your eyes.

“.....”

“.....”

As they obeyed with great disappointment, Jinwoo slowly leaned in closer and closer to Haein’s face until their lips touched.

Snowflakes continued to gently float down from the sky.

10.

There was a detective in the violent crimes investigation unit of the Seoul Central Police Station whose nickname was the Phantom.

Sehwan Lee was a new detective who had applied for and gotten a position with the unit. He had heard the rumors about the Phantom when he worked as a constable for a small local police station.

The Phantom boasted a 200 percent arrest rate. They said that when gangsters and violent criminals were confronted with the Phantom, who solved both his assigned active cases as well as cold cases, they turned into the gentlest of lambs. Constables in the area looked up to him and considered him a legend. On top of that, there was a rumor that the Phantom refused to be promoted because he wanted to focus on fieldwork.

That one’s probably not true. After all, who in their right mind would turn down a promotion?

Even if only half of the rumors were true, the fact was, the Phantom was the paragon of detectives. Sehwan was the envy of his colleagues when he was transferred to the violent crimes investigation unit at the Central Police Station.

Sehwan swallowed nervously as he scanned the office for the man himself. The hardened detectives who were used to dealing with violent offenders glared sharply at the unfamiliar visitor. Any one of them could be the Phantom.

Everyone's eyes look.....

Intimidated by the veteran detectives, Sehwan began to worry if he could cut it here.

"Um... Are you the rookie who is supposed to start today?"

A voice came from behind Sehwan and startled him. Sehwan hurriedly turned around and saluted.

"Sir!"

"Relax. No need for that. You're part of the family now."

The middle-aged male detective offered one of his two paper cups of coffee to Sehwan. "Here, my treat."

"Th-thank you!" Sehwan bowed and took the coffee.

The gesture felt like a comforting phone call from home after having moved out. A sip of coffee helped him relax. He checked out other people in the room as he drank, then turned to the detective who had given him the coffee.

"Um..... The chief told me I'd be working with a Detective Sung.....?"

"Oh, the Phantom?"

"Pfffft!" Sehwan barely managed to stop himself from spraying his coffee or having it come out of his nose.

"That's the nickname we gave Detective Sung because he appears and disappears so quickly, and it spread to other precincts before we knew it. You've heard about him, too, right?"

"Y-yes."

The detective laughed as he watched Sehwan nod nervously.

"Actually, the coffee I gave you was supposed to be for him." He briefly popped his head into the hallway and pointed with his chin. "Speak of the devil. Here he comes."

Sehwan couldn't contain his curiosity and hurried into the hallway. He turned toward the direction the other detective had gestured to and saw someone walking slowly from the other end of the hall toward them.

So that man is.....

The man was not rushing in the slightest, but he reached them in the blink of an eye.

Sehwan felt intimidated by him. Despite being the height of the average Korean male, Sehwan seemed to be suffocated while looking up at the man who was a head taller than he was.

The Phantom of Central Police Station.....

After meeting him in person, Sehwan was sure that this man didn't get the nickname just because he appeared and disappeared quickly.

"Hi."

"Hey. You heading out?"

"No, not right now. So is this the rookie?"

"That's right. This is Sehwan Lee."

Jinwoo greeted the other detective and put his hand on the frozen Sehwan's shoulder.

"Class is in session, then."

The detective grinned and nodded. "Sure. Have fun, you two."

And with that, Jinwoo shepherded the rookie away.

I-is he mad that I drank his coffee?

At the thought, Sehwan panicked and blurted out a question. "D-Detective Sung! Wh-where are we going?"

Jinwoo replied with a question of his own. "Why did you become a cop?"

"Oh... I..." Sehwan hesitated before remembering his dream that had gotten derailed these past few years after dealing exclusively with drunks at his last post.

“I wanted to catch bad guys.....”

“Right.” Jinwoo finally came to a stop. “So that’s what we’re going to do.”

Sehwan looked up to see Jinwoo’s grin. Anyone would be comforted by that smile.

“That’s also why I became a cop.”

That sentence made Sehwan’s heart race.

Ba-dump.

For the first time, he decided that his yearlong stint in the local police station hadn’t been a waste if it had led to this. The Phantom was going to teach him how to catch criminals. Any cop would be excited at this prospect.

“You coming?”

The answer was obvious, and Sehwan enthusiastically replied, “Of course!”

* * *

Sehwan fell asleep at his desk, exhausted from the hard work of catching small-time crooks all day. Jinwoo had planned to have Sehwan file the police reports, but.....

Taka-taka-tak.

Jinwoo stopped typing and glanced at Sehwan, who was in a deep sleep.

Training this guy is fun. I heard he stopped an armed robbery with his bare hands before, too.

Jinwoo was pleased, as it had been a while since they’d last gotten such a promising rookie.

“Heh-heh.”

The criminal sitting across from Jinwoo mistook his smile as the mood lightening, so he smiled as well. Jinwoo frowned at him.

“.....What are you laughing about?”

“I-I’m sorry.”

Jinwoo went back to typing on the keyboard.

“My lord, will you not allow us to take care of such menial tasks.....?”

He heard Igris’s voice from the shadows. Naturally, it would be very convenient to use his shadow soldiers. Jinwoo could clean up all of South Korea if he devoted his nearly ten-million-strong army to fight crime instead of training new detectives.

However, how would he handle the chaos and fear that would follow? There needed to be more of a balanced approach. Therefore, Jinwoo was careful in the use of his power and how it might impact society.

Jinwoo was almost done filing the reports while the rookie was still off in dreamland. As voices came from a corner of the office, Jinwoo concentrated on them.

“Detective, Jinee wasn’t the sort of person who would kill herself.”

“Okay, I understand how you feel, but I’ve already explained it to you! All the evidence—”

“But look at this text! Do you think a person who was going to kill herself in three hours would send a text like this?”

“Haah.....”

Maybe it was because the deceased’s name reminded him of Jinah’s, but something about the unrelenting argument between the two unnerved Jinwoo.

The exhausted and overworked detective snapped. “Listen to me! Suicide is more impulsive than planned—”

“May I take a look?”

The detective was startled by Jinwoo, who noiselessly approached him. Most detectives boasted senses keen enough to read guilt in someone’s eyes with one glance. But even those detectives were unable to sense Jinwoo’s approach, leading to him being nicknamed “the Phantom.”

“Detective Sung.....”

The perplexed detective gazed back at the woman, whose expression had turned hopeful.

Ah.....

Sensing that things might become troublesome, he pulled Jinwoo off to the side. He put a cigarette between his lips as he handed the file over to Jinwoo.

“Detective Sung..... Please don’t make things annoying for me.”

“.....”

Jinwoo didn’t answer the other detective’s pleas, his brows furrowing as he flipped through the file. Before he could light his cigarette, the detective instinctively took a step back at the vibes Jinwoo was giving off.

He’s a different person when he’s focused like this.....

The detective took a drag to calm himself down.

A woman had been found in the bathtub with her wrist slit. Cause of death was blood loss, and the knife used to cut her wrist had been found in the bathroom. No other prints were found except the victim’s. Although she appeared to have an outgoing personality, she had been suffering from depression. Most detectives would come to the conclusion that this was a suicide.

Jinwoo returned the file to the other detective. “Nothing strange here.”

“R-right?” The detective brightened as he took back the file.

“But.”

“But.....?” The smile dropped from the detective’s face.

“I’ll have a look myself.”

“Oh.....”

The Phantom smelled something fishy. As Jinwoo walked over to the friend of the deceased woman who was waiting anxiously, the other detective grimaced.

Does that jerk ever let up?

The friend raised her head at the sound of Jinwoo’s voice.

“I’m Detective Jinwoo Sung. May I speak to you?”

The friend nodded with a determined look, hope and sorrow warring on her

face.

“Yes, of course!”

* * *

A black shadow rose inside a quiet and empty residence. It was Jinwoo.

The condominium seemed a little too big for a woman who lived alone. The last signs of life from before the owner died remained throughout the apartment. Although it was the darkest time of night, Jinwoo didn't need to turn on the lights. He could see just as well as he did during midday.

Jinwoo entered the bathroom in which the deceased had apparently spent her last moments. The smell of blood that hadn't been cleaned hit his nose. Standing on the spot where the woman had decided to kill herself, Jinwoo stared at the tub in silence.

As he scanned the bloodstains, he could only imagine the pain she must have been in. But that was all he could do: imagine. Those left behind never really knew why the person chose death or how much pain they had suffered in the moment.

Jinwoo crouched to look at the blood spatters. He then recalled the last text she had sent. It had been filled with excitement about seeing her friend soon. As the friend had said, it didn't read like a text from someone who was planning to kill herself. But maybe she just wanted to believe her friend wouldn't choose death and leave her behind without saying good-bye. Those left behind often had no way of knowing what dwelled in the minds and hearts of the deceased.

Well, most people didn't. Jinwoo, however, had a way to hear the voices of the dead.

I used to need a dead body, but.....

At Jinwoo's command, the dry blood began to change into a blackish-red liquid flowing all around him. The liquid gathered in one place and became a pool of boiling blood. The mass of blood moved on its own as if it were still alive and grew bigger and bigger.

The King of the Dead, the Shadow Monarch, then gave the absolute order a dead person could not disobey.

“Arise.”

The shadow of a young female adult shot out from the pool of blood.

Splash!

Blood dripped from the ends of the woman’s hair. She looked around in confusion and let out a painful groan.

“Ah..... Ahhh.....!”

She was likely in pain from being stuck in the moment of death. Using the authority of the Shadow Monarch, Jinwoo ordered the woman to be calm, as she was now an undead being, separated from the pain of the living.

“Don’t be afraid.”

The comforting voice of the King of the Dead helped her compose herself. She appeared as her physical body had looked the moment of her death, so Jinwoo conjured up clothes made from the darkness to cover her up.

“Oh.....”

She cautiously wrapped the clothes over her shoulders even tighter around her.

Her name was Jinee Seo, so Jinwoo addressed her by this name.

“Jinee Seo..... Did you take your own life?”

The shadow, Jinee, nodded.

Jinwoo, who had knelt on one knee to be eye level with her, looked her in the face and asked quietly, “Could you tell me why?”

Jinee, who had been frozen like a block of ice, slowly parted her lips. “I.....”

* * *

Ding-dong!

The middle-aged man put the picture frame containing a photo of his daughter back in its place as the doorbell rang late in the night.

Who could that be at this hour.....?

He got up from his seat and walked over to the intercom. On the other side of

the door stood a man in a neatly pressed suit. The one vaguely strange thing about him was the black glove that the man wore on only his left hand. With no further suspicions, the middle-aged man turned on the intercom speaker.

Beep!

The man raised his ID to the camera.

“This is Detective Jinwoo Sung from the violent crimes investigation unit of the Central Police Station. I have something I need to ask you about your daughter. Do you have a minute?”

The picture on the ID and the face on the screen matched. The middle-aged man hurriedly opened the door after hearing the word *detective*, not caring about how late it was.

“Have you solved the case? Do you know how my daughter died?”

Jinwoo looked at the face of Gyunam Seo, Jinee’s father, and shook his head. “Nothing conclusive yet. I just have a few questions I’d like to ask you regarding your daughter.”

Gyunam looked a little disappointed that there had been no developments in the case.

Jinwoo quietly asked, “Would you come with me?”

Gyunam thought about it for a minute, then nodded firmly. “Of course. I’ll do whatever it takes to find out how she died.”

He stepped out of the apartment and locked the door before turning to Jinwoo. “Let’s go.”

With a quick nod, Jinwoo headed off. “This way.”

* * *

Gyunam thought they would head to the police station, but they went to a nearby café instead. When he asked Jinwoo why they were at a café, he got only a vague answer about the detective needing a quiet place to talk. They sat across from each other.

With a heavy expression, Jinwoo asked Gyunam, “What kind of student was Jinee?”

“Pardon me?”

“Anyone holding a grudge against her by any chance?”

It took Gyunam a moment to realize the purpose of the question.

He waved his hand widely. “No, not at all. Jinee wasn’t the type of person who would do anything to offend someone. She was so kind and innocent.....”

Gyunam bowed his head and began to sob. It took a while before his shoulders stopped shaking and he was able to raise his head.

“I’m sorry, Detective. I still can’t believe my daughter is gone just like that.....”

“I’m sure she meant a lot to you.”

“Of course. I’m sure you already know this, but Jinee wasn’t my biological daughter. Still, I loved and cherished her as if she were my own, perhaps even more.” Gyunam tried to contain his sadness as he continued. “I wish she told me she was in pain or that she was going through a hard time.....”

Despite Gyunam’s show of emotion, Jinwoo had regarded him with cold eyes from the start. Jinwoo took out a cell phone from his pocket.

“I discovered a voice recording while going through the items your daughter left.”

“.....Pardon?”

“If you would.....”

Jinwoo pressed Play, and out came the voice of the shadow he’d recorded earlier.

“I.....”

It was a testimony of the horrifying abuse Jinee had endured from her adoptive father since she was a little girl.

Gyunam had dropped the grieving-father act, taken aback.

Jinee had believed that she had escaped his abuse by going to a university far from him. But when Gyunam started contacting her and saying that he missed her, she decided to kill herself. Although it was true that she had committed suicide, she’d been driven over the edge by someone else.

Click.

When the recording finished playing, Gyunam looked up with a hardened face. “Why.....did you play that for me?”

Gyunam was particularly good at reading other people, so he knew that if Jinwoo’s purpose was to arrest him, the detective would’ve brought backup and handcuffed him. That would’ve been case closed. But this detective had said he needed somewhere quiet to talk and brought Gyunam here instead of the police station. Gyunam had a hunch that the detective had another motive.

As if to prove him right, the emotionless detective finally showed a smile. “You have two choices.”

Gyunam actually had choices! He clenched his fists tight at being thrown a lifeline.

Nice!

The detective continued. “The first is to turn yourself in and confess all your crimes.”

“And.....what’s the other choice?”

“If you don’t confess, then you’ll have to pay the appropriate price.”

Gyunam had to clamp his jaw shut to contain his gleeful laugh. If there was a will, there was a way. To think the detective who uncovered dirt on Gyunam was just as dirty himself. As a doctor, Gyunam lived a comfortable life. He was wealthy enough to pay this lowly cop whatever he wanted.

Stifling a smile, he probed Jinwoo. “How much will it take?”

“This is good enough.”

Smiling bitterly, Jinwoo put the cell phone back in his pocket. Knowing how many people had ended up regretting making this choice, he thought this man trying to stifle a laugh was pretty pathetic.

In an instant, Jinwoo’s facial expression changed. “Listen carefully.”

Jinwoo seemed to exude a strange but powerful presence.

“This world you’re currently in isn’t the world you know. It’s similar, but it’s a

different world of my creation.”

It was a world where the living could not exist without his permission: the realm of eternal rest. Jinwoo calmly added that it was also Gyunam’s prison from here on.

Confused by Jinwoo’s mood change and explanation, Gyunam was flustered. “Look, Detective, I don’t know what you’re talking about.....”

“Think carefully.”

Gyunam began feeling suffocated by Jinwoo’s glare.

“Do you remember how you got here?”

As Gyunam tried to think, he sensed a strange chill run up his spine and felt disoriented.

Huh.....?

Why was there no one in this brightly lit café except for him and the peculiar detective? Never mind customers—the owner of the café should be there to run the store. At the very least, there should’ve been people walking by outside. Yet there was no trace of anyone inside the building or outside the windows.

“Ah.....”

As the strangeness registered, everything around Gyunam began to disappear into darkness. Eventually, in the pitch-black environment, all that remained were a table and the two chairs he and the detective were sitting on.

“A-ahhhh!” Gyunam knocked over the chair as he bolted up. He stumbled backward, white as a sheet. “Wh-who are you? This is a dream, right? Right?!”

He stabbed his finger at Jinwoo as he yelled.

Bump.

He backed into something hard like a wall, so he turned his head as goose bumps covered his body for no apparent reason.

The wall moved. Or rather, the giant ant with a body as sturdy as a wall moved. The ant put his face closer to Gyunam and quietly put a finger to his

own mouth.

“Shhh.”

At that moment.....

“Ngh! Guuuh.....!”

The arms of several dozen ants emerged from the darkness to drag him somewhere. Gyunam was going to experience extreme pain and wish to die, but they wouldn't let him off that easily. After all, the shadow in charge of Gyunam's punishment was both an excellent soldier and an outstanding healer.

“Skraaah!” Beru returned into the darkness after politely bowing to his king.

.....

Jinwoo slowly stood up. At that moment, a figure who had been watching the whole thing while hiding in darkness walked toward him from behind.

It was Jinee. Jinwoo knew that her pain would never be erased no matter how much the guilty suffered. But if this simple gesture could serve as a small consolation.....

He approached Jinee and touched her forehead to erase the memories of her adoptive father.

“Thank you. Thank you, my lord.”

Jinee bowed several times in gratitude. Reborn as a shadow, she instinctively knew who he was. However, Jinwoo wasn't planning to use her as a soldier. Thus, it was time to send her to the Void.

Before releasing her, Jinwoo kindly asked, “Do you have anything more you'd like to say?”

She paused in thought. “Well..... If it's not too much trouble, would you grant me one request?”

* * *

The next day, Jinee's friend came to the police station early in the morning.

Jinwoo spoke to her outside of his office. “Considering the circumstances, this case cannot be deemed a homicide. We'll be closing the investigation soon.”

The friend stared at Jinwoo in disbelief. Grasping at straws, she pleaded with him. “Really.....? Isn’t there even the slightest chance?”

Jinwoo quietly shook his head in reply.

Jinee’s friend dropped her head in sorrow. “Then Jinee.....”

Jinwoo wordlessly handed her a gift wrapped in some cute wrapping paper.

“Huh?”

“This has your name on it, doesn’t it?”

“.....Yes.”

It was a birthday gift to her from the deceased. It could’ve been lost, but it had found its way to its intended recipient.

“Jinee got this for me.....?”

“Yes. I figured she’d want you to have it.”

“Oh..... Thank you.”

Her eyes welled with tears as she thanked Jinwoo.

If Jinee hadn’t received her adoptive father’s texts containing his evil intentions a mere hour earlier, would she and her friend be celebrating the birthday as they had planned instead of her slitting her wrist an hour later?

Jinwoo was staring off into the distance, lost in thought, when he felt his phone vibrating in his pocket.

“Excuse me.”

He turned away from the weeping friend and answered the phone.

“Boss!”

A welcome voice came from the other end.

“It’s me, Jinho!”

Later that evening, Jinwoo headed to the pork belly restaurant he usually ate at with Jinho.

“I have something to tell you, boss!”

Jinwoo could hear the purpose in Jinho's voice over the phone.

Jinho was already seated at a table with a good view of the entrance, anxiously awaiting Jinwoo. As soon as Jinwoo entered the restaurant, Jinho raised his hand quickly.

"Boss!"

Since graduating from university, Jinho had been learning the ins and outs of business from his father. He was a fine young man now, but to Jinwoo, he was like a little brother to him.

"Hey," Jinwoo greeted Jinho with a smile and sat across from him.

Jinwoo noted the shot glass in Jinho's hand and the half-empty bottle of soju on the table.

He can't hold his liquor, though.....

He wasn't sure what Jinho was up to, but it apparently required a lot of courage to do it.

"So, what was with the sudden phone call?" Jinwoo asked.

Jinho hesitated before pulling a small box out of his pocket. It contained an opulent ring.

"Boss!"

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to propose to Jinah."

There it is.

Jinwoo had braced himself for Jinho being in trouble with Jinah again and wanting to whine about it. He smiled, but Jinho seemed to misunderstand it and opened his drooping eyes wide.

"Boss! I'm completely serious! I'm going to ask her tonight. But.....do you think she'll like this ring?"

Since Jinah often complained at home about Jinho taking forever to pop the question, she would be over the moon. But Jinwoo decided to be vague, just to tease Jinho.

“Well..... The thing is, I’m pretty bad at this kind of stuff.”

“Argh.” Jinho’s head dropped in agony, then perked up again. “That’s okay, boss. Actually, I picked up a bunch of presents for her because I didn’t know what she would like.”

Jinho pulled the blueprints of a building out of a large manila envelope.

“This building is being constructed on some land our company owns. When Jinah completes her medical degree, I want to open a hospital—”

“Hang on.” Jinwoo cut Jinho off because the blueprint looked quite familiar. “Is this building estimated to be worth.....thirty billion won?”

Jinho looked surprised. “Yes, but how did you know that.....?”

The blueprints were the same ones Jinho had offered as compensation to help him become a guildmaster in the previous timeline.

Jinwoo managed to suppress his laugh, but seeing Jinwoo’s reaction, Jinho turned red and scrambled to explain himself.

“Boss, this is all I can do for Jinah at this point in time, since I’m still learning the business, but—”

“No, it’s not that.” Jinwoo wiped the smile off his face and spoke seriously so Jinho wouldn’t misunderstand him. “Jinho.”

“Yes, boss?”

“You don’t need to shower Jinah with presents and try so hard, because you’re such a great guy. You just need to be your true self.”

“.....” Jinho was at a loss for words. He began to tear up. “Boss.....”

Jinwoo belatedly recalled what Jinho’s drinking habit was.

Sure enough, Jinho asked, “Can I give you a hug?”

“Nope.”

“Boss!”

Unable to contain his emotions, Jinho went in for the hug, but Jinwoo held out his arm and skillfully blocked his approach.

“Waaaaah!”

Jinwoo grinned at the sobbing Jinho.

Although Jinho could be a bit slow on the uptake, Jinwoo had seen how Jinho was when their lives were on the line. Whether he was dealing with con men in a C-rank dungeon or kidnapped and tortured by an S-rank hunter out for revenge, Jinho had chosen loyalty over his own safety. He was a good man. That was Jinwoo’s honest evaluation of Jinho after observing him for a long time.

Jinwoo poured some soju into his own empty shot glass. “A toast for a successful proposal?”

“What?”

When Jinho looked up, Jinwoo held his shot glass forward.

“If she says yes, we’ll be a real family. So how about a toast for a successful proposal?”

“A real family with you.....”

Jinho looked quite emotional. His gaze was fixed on Jinwoo’s left hand that held the shot glass. Jinho knew what was inside the black glove Jinwoo always wore.

“Uh.....boss?”

“Hmm?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, anything.”

Jinho peeked at Jinwoo’s hand again and gathered his courage. “Your hand..... How did you get such a serious wound?”

It was a nasty-looking scar that made people instantly think of how painful it must’ve been. It couldn’t have been a run-of-the-mill accident that caused it, which was why Jinho needed liquid courage to broach the topic.

“This?” Jinwoo briefly looked at his left hand and chuckled. “I got it when saving the world.”

He looked at Jinho, who laughed at Jinwoo’s offhand response.

“Geez, boss.....”

Jinwoo laughed with him. Eventually, Jinho realized that Jinwoo had been holding the shot glass up for some time, so he raised his as well.

“To a successful proposal!”

Jinwoo gently brought his glass closer to Jinho’s and wished him luck. “To a successful proposal.”

Clink!

The two men toasted and downed the shots. While Jinho frowned at the bitter taste of soju, Jinwoo put down his glass on the table with a wistful smile.

I wish I could feel the alcohol on a day like this, but.....

Absolute power did have its cons.

“Oh.” Speaking of family, Jinho suddenly remembered about Jinwoo’s. “How’s your wife doing?”

“She’s doing well.”

“How about Sooho? I need to visit him soon. He can walk now, right?”

Jinwoo shook his head with a laugh. “No, he’s barely six months old, so he can only crawl.”

“It’s weird, but I feel like you and your wife’s kid should have started running right out of the womb.”

“What kind of people do you think we are?”

“Ha-ha!”

Jinwoo smiled at Jinho’s joking grin. It crossed Jinho’s mind that childcare for a baby at this stage was difficult for the parents.

“Then I guess you should head home soon?”

“Hmm... I think I will.”

Ever since the first mention of family, Jinwoo had wanted to go home to Haein and their son, Sooho.

Jinwoo arrived at his home in the outskirts of Seoul and parked his car. It was a huge house, one that someone on a detective's salary wouldn't be able to afford, but since the wife was a well-known celebrity athlete, no one was suspicious of it. It was Jinwoo and Haein's little secret that this house hadn't been built by humans.

When Jinwoo entered the house, he was greeted with the sight of Bellion and Igris glaring at each other, refusing to back down.

Haein walked into the room holding Sooho in her arms. "Honey."

Smiling, Jinwoo took Sooho from her and gently rocked him.

"Pa!" Sooho giggled and held out his arms to hug him.

Jinwoo nestled his son against his shoulder and pointed at the two shadow soldiers with his chin.

"What's wrong with them?"

"The thing is..." Haein couldn't answer as she tried not to laugh.

Bellion spoke up before she could say anything.

"What do you mean, we shouldn't teach the little master how to use a sword? Do you think that makes sense, Igris?"

Igris responded just as aggressively. "Academic grades count most in this world, Bellion."

Igris clutched study materials for toddlers, though it was a mystery when he'd ordered them. Jinwoo found their fight ridiculous and took a step toward them.

"You two....."

When the marshals realized that Jinwoo had come home, they hastily turned toward him and dropped to their knees.

"My lord!"

"My lord!"

Jinwoo sucked his teeth at the two overzealous soldiers. "Learning swordsmanship and studying is all good, but how about letting the kid learn to walk first?"

Bellion and Igris briefly looked at each other and then bowed their heads at Jinwoo.

“That is quite reasonable.”

“You are right, my lord.”

“Good.” As Jinwoo grinned, the baby in his arms smiled as well.

“Heeee.”

Like father, like son. When they smiled, they looked like clones of each other. Seeing them like that brought a smile to Haein’s face as well.

* * *

Around the time the rookie Sehwan Lee was getting accustomed to his work as a detective, Jinwoo was summoned by the chief of police. It wasn’t a good sign that another senior detective who had visited the chief just before had given Jinwoo a strange look on his way out.

Jinwoo walked up to the chief’s desk. “You asked to see me?”

The chief of police was gazing out the window. “Rumor has it that you’re still poking around other detectives’ cases.....”

This was just as Jinwoo predicted. No wonder the other detective had looked at him like that. Jinwoo stifled a cough.

The chief of police then turned toward Jinwoo and smiled. “Please back off a bit so the other detectives don’t resent you, Hunter Sung.”

It was Jinchul Woo, the youngest ever to be chief of police. Naturally, Jinwoo’s covert operations had helped make that happen by assisting Jinchul with his casework on the down-low.

Jinwoo smiled and corrected his boss. “I’m not a hunter anymore, sir.”

“I’m still more comfortable calling you Hunter Sung.”

Jinchul then eyed the file on his desk. “Did you know that the legal guardian of that woman who committed suicide suddenly went missing a few days ago?”

“Really?”

“Coincidentally, every surveillance camera around his house has been out of

order.”

“Oh my, what a coincidence.”

Jinchul couldn't help but laugh at Jinwoo's fake reactions. He tossed the file into the garbage can.

“I have complete trust in you, Hunter Sung.”

Jinwoo briefly bowed to Jinchul in appreciation of his unconditional trust in him.

“But that's not actually why I called you in here.....”

Jinchul gently pushed forward a note from one corner of his desk. The name and room number of a hospital were written on the memo.

“.....I thought you would like to know.”

“What's this?”

“Association President, or rather, just President Gunhee Go is in critical condition.”

* * *

This was the second time that Jinwoo had visited Gunhee Go's hospital room. About ten years ago, the Elixir of Life that saved his mother's life had also saved the life of President Go. Jinwoo now faced a frail President Go on the verge of death once again.

President Go wasn't surprised to see Jinwoo on this second visit. He nodded at the young man wearing a hood and tapped the oxygen mask covering his mouth.

After Jinwoo carefully removed the oxygen mask, President Go spoke between labored breaths.

“You came back, young man..... Truth is, I have searched for you.....for a long time.”

Jinwoo looked at President Go in sorrow. “If you want your illness to be cured.....”

Even before Jinwoo could extend his offer, President Go shook his head.

“I.....have lived long enough. I did everything I needed to do during the ten years you gave me. That’s good enough.”

In the deleted timeline, President Go had sold his business and founded the Hunter’s Association. In the current timeline, he was a model businessman who headed various charities. And instead of extending his life, he wanted something else.....

“I have.....a favor to ask you.”

Jinwoo nodded.

President Go’s eyes shone earnestly. “You said there was a world in which I fought with you, right?”

Jinwoo silently nodded once again.

“By any chance, could you show me that time? I want to see what kind of people you and I were.....”

“There might be memories you wouldn’t want to remember.”

“That’s okay. I just want those forgotten memories back.”

Seeing the desperation on President Go’s face, Jinwoo took his hand. With that, the memories from the deleted timeline flooded President Go’s head like a dam bursting.

“Ahhh.....”

Tears began to stream down President Go’s face. Jinwoo slowly took his hood off and exposed his identity. President Go held Jinwoo’s hands tighter and sobbed harder at the sight of Jinwoo’s face.

“Hunter Sung.....once again.....”

Jinwoo gently held President Go’s hands as he struggled to breathe. President Go then turned his face toward the hospital room ceiling.

“I truly.....truly.....with young heroes like you.....”

He sounded content. President Go’s heart was filled with joy, and as his tears continued to fall, he breathed his last. Jinwoo’s eyes were wet as he gently closed the president’s eyes.

Soon, the life-support machine announced the patient's passing.

Beeeeep!

By the time the alarmed doctors rushed into the room, the strange visitor had already vanished.

The breaking news of President Gunhee Go's death was broadcast on billboards and screens all along the street Jinwoo walked. Scores of viewers were saddened by the news. In both timelines, President Go had been loved by many, and his death brought them much sorrow.

As he watched footage of President Go when he was still alive, Jinwoo bid his farewell to the image on the screens.

Good-bye..... You were a hero who sacrificed yourself for many people.

Jinwoo left the busy street full of people and headed somewhere less crowded.

It was fall, and the leaves on the trees that lined the road had changed colors. Every time the wind blew, a bunch of leaves fell. Winter would be here soon.

And spring will come back to us again.

Jinwoo was lost in thought as he watched the scattering leaves. After a beat, his phone began to ring.

It was Haein.

"Honey?"

As soon as Jinwoo answered the phone, he heard a panicked voice.

"H-honey! Sooho! Our Sooho.....!"

Had something happened even with two of his marshals guarding the house?

Thinking that the worst had happened, Jinwoo's voice went up. "What about Sooho?"

Haein sounded like she was in utter disbelief.

"He's flying!"

"What?"

“Sooho is flying around the house!”

At that moment, something Jinho had said a few days ago echoed in Jinwoo’s head.

“It’s weird, but I feel like you and your wife’s kid should have started running right out of the womb.”

Jinwoo was rendered speechless.

“Wh-what should we do?”

Oddly enough, Jinwoo felt like laughing as he listened to his wife freaking out. He decided to calm Haein down first.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll teach Sooho how to fly properly.”

“You..... You can fly, too?”

Ah. Had Jinwoo not told her that? Thinking back, he’d ridden Kaisei the flying wyvern with Haein, since he hadn’t been used to flying at the time. Jinwoo couldn’t hold back any longer and laughed out loud.

More leaves were blown off trees by the wind. After the fall, winter and spring would follow. Everything has a beginning and an end, and a new beginning came from every end.

“No, Sooho!”

Clank!

Though, in Jinwoo’s home, winter was still far away.

EPILOGUE



EPILOGUE

1.

Inside of an egg, the unborn Beru could hear the queen ant's voice through the thick shell.

"For the kingdom."

For the kingdom.

"Bring fear to all those who stand in our way."

Bring fear to all those who stand in our way.

Beru needed to become strong. He had to be strong. This was the first mission given to the sleeping embryonic Beru. The queen's drive to build a bigger kingdom had created a horrifying monster.

"Skraaaaaaaah!"

The young ant soldier broke out of his egg with a roar. Based on the killing intent in his eyes, Beru was incomparable to any other ant. The queen was thrilled by her masterpiece.

This child can definitely defeat those humans with the strange powers.....

The queen's eyes twinkled. But before she could give the most powerful warrior his first order, the hungry Beru did as he wished. He took hold of the hand of one of the workers who had helped him hatch.

.....?

Before the worker ant realized what was going on, Beru bit off its head.

Crunch, crunch!

".....!"

Even the queen was shocked by Beru's unexpected actions but, overwhelmed by his presence, she didn't think to stop him. Beru finished his meal and stood before the queen as the worker ant's bodily fluids dripped disgustingly from his

mouth.

Bring fear to all those.....

Yet the source of this powerful fear would bring fear to their allies as well. Realizing this, the queen had a look around. The brave soldiers of her kingdom were quivering in fear. Being in control of these soldiers, she was able to sense how they felt now.

Beru had passed her test. In her mind, she had given birth to her best work yet.

“Become even stronger.”

The queen gave Beru another command to prepare for the invasion of the humans’ territory.

“Become unstoppable.”

* * *

Beru began eating everything on the island—from small creatures such as earthworms and larvae to huge fish and mammals from the ocean. He didn’t even hesitate to eat his own kind when there was not enough food.

As he devoured every living thing in sight, he realized one thing: They were all afraid of him. It didn’t matter if they were poisonous or huge. They all had the same look of fear in their eyes whenever he faced them, because survival was both the basic and ultimate goal of every living creature.

.....

Again and again, Beru was met with proof that he was at the top of the food chain.

I am.....

An apex predator.

Beru’s head broke through the surface of the water, where he could see the land at the edge of the ocean. Out there beyond the water was a different world.

Mother keeps warning me about those powerful humans. How strong will they

be?

He was curious whether there truly existed adversaries so strong that he, an apex predator, had to continue to train himself. Was he strong enough to take them yet?

Beru's gaze kept returning to the mainland.

"It is too early."

The queen could see inside Beru's head and shut down his curiosity. He had no choice in the matter. Beru stared at the mainland in a daze before submersing himself in the water again. He would find his answers in due time.

.....

For now, he would wait quietly as per the queen's command.

When the humans finally set foot on the island, Beru got the opportunity to test his true power for the first time.

"Wh-what are you?"

"Ahhhh!"

But it wasn't a battle. It was but a one-sided hunt, a typical day for Beru. Seeing how scared the hunters were was an utter disappointment to him.

Fight these weaklings.....?

Had Beru waited all that time just for this? His prey gave off the scent of intense fear. Once again, Beru was confirmed as being at the top of the food chain.

How boring.

Just then, an adversary who didn't fear him appeared. Never having experienced this, Beru's heart began to pound.

Human..... Are you not afraid of me?

Not wanting to kill the human right away, Beru addressed him. "Are you the king of humans?"

The human replied, ".....To think a bug could talk."

It was likely the second time any living creature looked at Beru with an emotion other than fear in their eyes.

Twinkle, twinkle!

.....

Beru broke out into a cold sweat as he looked at the young master staring at him with bright eyes. No matter how he tried to escape the suffocating pressure...

“Anty! Anty!”

...even if he flew up to the sky to do so...

“Anty! Anty!”

...the little master was right behind him when Beru looked over his shoulder.

.....

Naturally, it would have been easy to get away from this toddler if Beru really tried, but the problem was that he was the son of the master. If the little master got hurt while chasing after the ant, Beru would be responsible.

“Anty!”

Eventually, among the three marshals, it fell to Beru to assist Haein in caring for Sooho.

“.....”

Beru put Sooho to sleep and then returned to the realm of eternal rest. As he quietly sank into a shadow, the world of endless darkness spread out before him. Others may think this place was frightening, but Beru was comfortable here under his Monarch’s authority.

Beru was in deep thought as he made his way to the territory of the ant army.

Why does the little master keep looking for me?

.....Beru couldn’t figure it out. After all, to this day, people freaked out when they saw him. With this question in mind, Beru changed course. Would it be more helpful to consult a human to get answers about the human mind?

Because his master didn't like turning humans into shadow soldiers, there were barely any formerly human soldiers in their ranks. However, Beru knew of one shadow soldier who used to be human: Marshal Igris.

When Beru explained his conundrum to Igris, the knight immediately had an answer for him.

"What's not to like?"

".....?"

Nodding, Igris quickly elaborated. "An ant that is bigger than a human who can walk, fly, and even talk. What's not to like for a toddler?"

"....."

Beru had never thought of it that way. He pondered Igris's response over and over as he returned to the territory of the ant army.

The little master liked Beru because he was bigger than a human and could fly and talk. But if he liked Beru for such simple reasons, couldn't he just as easily dislike him? Beru had heard when human children grow into adulthood, they would lose their interest in insects. The thought of this brought his mood down. Beru had gotten used to others' looks of disgust, but it made him sad to think the little master might one day look upon him the same way.

.....

Beru changed course again as he flew in silence. This time, he arrived at a construction site. Bearded dwarves and ant soldiers were working on a humongous stone statue of their monarch, as per Beru's plan. They bowed at him as soon as they spotted him.

The bearded dwarf elder who oversaw the construction site ran out and welcomed Beru.

"Grand Marshal, you're here."

Beru inspected their work before turning to the elder. "I want to change the plan a little bit."

"Pardon me?" Although he was trembling in fear, the elder attempted to dissuade Beru from wasting their hard work. "The plan was to complete this

Statue of the Monarch to celebrate his thirty-second birthday and—”

“No, no, I’m not throwing it out. I just want to change one part here.....”

The elder quietly nodded as he listened to Beru’s explanation. “Yes, this is most certainly possible. I think the result will be even better, Marshal Beru.”

“Hee-hee! Good.”

They both grinned at each other excitedly.

“Then we’ll go ahead—”

Beru put his index finger on his lips and interrupted him. “I’ll be back after I take care of some business.”

* * *

“Are we really doing this, boss?”

“C’mon..... You backing out?”

“N-no, boss.”

The man glared at his lackey sitting in the front passenger seat of the car and then turned to look at the house again. It was a two-story home built in a remote area, as if the owner was purposefully avoiding other people. It was the house of Detective Jinwoo Sung. Having checked several times, the men were confident they were at the right house.

“Our organization is gone because of Jinwoo Sung. It’s time for some payback. An eye for an eye, right?”

“That’s right, boss.” The three lackeys answered at the same time.

Good.

“We are a team of four burglars. His wife and kid were killed by burglars. Got it?”

“Yes, boss.”

The boss had a sinister smile on his face. Despite the size of the house, it had no security system. It was practically an open invitation. These people were lucky they hadn’t been robbed until now.

“Keep cool and don’t screw up.”

The lackeys nodded.

“Let’s go.”

Chk, chk, chk, chk.

The four men carefully got out of the car and approached the house before rushing to climb over the wall. Having practiced this several times, they were able to scale the wall easily.

Tak!

Only four feet hit the ground.

What happened to the other two guys?

The boss looked at the lackey next to him, who was shaking his head. Four people had climbed the wall but only two had landed on the other side. How did that make sense? The boss spun around, then looked back to see his third lackey had also vanished.

Those idiots.....!

Enraged, the boss forgot himself for a moment and was about to yell, but suddenly a hand covered his mouth.

“Shhh.....”

The little master had just fallen asleep. His nap was not to be interrupted by pesky, uninvited guests. Luckily, Beru could still hear the little master snoring.

Satisfied, Beru looked at the human.

“Hnn.....! Hnn, hnn!”

It was a familiar look. It was a familiar feeling. Prey always looked the same in the presence of a predator. As much as Beru appreciated his liege’s trust and the little master’s affections, this felt good to him, too.

“Hee-hee!”

Beru relished the fear in the man’s eyes as he dragged him away. The screams ended as abruptly as they had started.

“What do you think?”

The elder proudly presented the Statue of the Monarch to Beru. The statue bearing their master’s visage was so incredibly tall that one had to strain their neck looking up to see the top of it. Every bearded dwarf and ant soldier had been summoned to complete the statue on time.

“Hee-hee!” Beru looked upon the statue with satisfaction, noting the change he’d requested.

“As you asked, on his left shoulder.....”

The little master was perched on their master’s left shoulder. The father and the son. Their king would likely be elated at the sight of this grand and beautiful statue. And it would certainly be a significant gift to present the little master should he visit this place in the distant future.

Beru laughed out loud at the inevitability. “Kee-heh-heh-heh!”

The bearded dwarves and the ant soldiers laughed along with him.

Ha-ha-ha-ha!

“Yaaah!” A toddler’s joyful shriek interrupted the laughter.

“.....?” Surprised, Beru looked over his shoulder to find a toddler standing there.

“Anty!”

As they say, like father, like son. Sooho was already able to enter the realm of eternal rest. Marshal Beru, currently the one in charge of helping to raise the child, gave a deep sigh.

“Skrah!”

2.

“Hello, Mrs. Cha.”

“Oh, hello.”

Haein nervously entered the office of the director of the kindergarten. She

and Jinwoo had been worried because Sooho, despite already being five years old, had never interacted with kids his own age. Exactly a week after starting at a kindergarten near their home, Haein got a call to report to the office. She was worried that something had happened to Sooho or that Sooho himself had done something wrong.

The director escorted Haein inside. The two women sat across from each other. Haein looked gloomy, like a dark cloud during rainy season. The director, a middle-aged woman, understood very well how Haein was feeling right now. She tried to speak in the gentlest voice possible in order to reassure Haein.

“There is no need to worry. The thing is.....we just wanted to ask you a few things.”

“Oh, okay.”

The stone-faced Haein nodded as the director pushed a sketchbook toward her.

“Here..... Could you please take a look at these drawings?”

As Haein picked up the sketchbook, the director continued. “Sooho drew these.”

A cute child’s drawing of an ant was on the page. Why was the director showing this to Haein? She couldn’t figure it out.

“What’s wrong with this drawing.....?”

The director hesitated a bit; then she spoke with a little sigh. “Sooho’s teacher had asked the class to draw a friend.”

“Oh.”

Haein took a second look and noticed that the ant stood on two feet. It hit her that this was no ordinary ant but rather Marshal Beru.

“There are more drawings on the next page. The teacher asked if Sooho had other friends.”

Haein turned the page. There was a drawing of a shadowy human-looking figure with a red mane on the top of his head who was holding an object that was clearly a sword.

Igris.....

Haein placed a hand on her forehead as she realized who the drawing portrayed. Igris looked like a trustworthy knight to the people who knew him, but what about those who didn't? Haein could feel a headache coming on.

What followed were drawings of Bellion holding the extending sword and Fang performing magic. Her headache seemed to grow with each drawing.

.....

As Haein silently went through the pictures, the director misread her facial expression and grew worried.

“The next one is how Sooho drew his family.”

Haein turned to the next page. There were countless black figures behind two people who she assumed were her husband and her. Since Sooho had been around shadow soldiers his entire life, he considered them family as well.

This is what we look like to Sooho.

Touched, Haein's nose tingled as she looked at Sooho's warm depiction of the shadow soldiers. On the other hand, Sooho's teachers had found the drawings confusing and wondered if there was something they should be aware of with Sooho. The director wondered the same, which was why she had arranged this meeting with Haein.

With a serious look on her face, the director continued. “The last page is on the topic of home. This is the main reason I've called you here.”

What did he draw this time? Haein nervously turned to the last page.

It was a drawing of a small and ordinary-looking house. The problem was that the land it was on was entirely black. More than 70 percent of the page had been colored in.

“We have taken care of many children, but we have never seen any child depict their friends and family like this.” The director calmly pointed at the black part. “When Sooho's teacher asked him why he drew the ground like this, he said his friends, family, and his huge dad were there.”

Huge dad.....?

It sounded strange, but Haein understood what Sooho had meant in drawing this picture.

“Do you have any idea why he would draw such pictures?”

Haein couldn't tell her the truth, so she shook her head.

“.....I thought as much.”

The director nodded, as if she understood Haein's position. At first, she had even suspected that Sooho might have been abused at home, but they found no evidence of this, and the boy was always so happy.

Sometimes, it just so happened that there would be a kid who saw the world in their own way.

“Maybe.....Sooho has a special talent for art?” Convinced of this, the director smiled.

Because she knew the real reason, Haein perked up and smiled awkwardly. “Ah, yes, yes.”

She was relieved that it wasn't a big problem. However, the drawings weren't all that was on the director's agenda today. She hesitated, as she was unsure whether to bring something up with Haein or not. She came to a decision and looked even more serious than she did when presenting the drawings.

“Mrs. Cha..... Actually, there is one more thing I need to tell you.”

* * *

At the violent crimes investigation unit at the Central Police Station, excited voices rang throughout the office following an announcement of promotions.

“Congratulations, sir!”

“Congratulations!”

“Shouldn't you be treating us to a drink, Captain Sung?”

Jinwoo was mobbed by his team members and managed to escape only thanks to his partner, Sehwan.

“Let's go, Jinwoo.”

“Sure.”

Jinwoo was met with words of congratulations all around him as he left the station with a smile on his face. Sehwan, now a veteran detective himself, also congratulated Jinwoo.

“Congratulations!”

Jinwoo replied with a smile. As they walked side by side, Sehwan scanned the area before cautiously moving closer to Jinwoo.

“So..... Why did you accept the promotion this time? You’ve been refusing the higher-ups even though they kept bugging you all this time.”

Jinwoo gave Sehwan the side-eye as to ask why he wanted to know, then replied with a chuckle.

“Because I didn’t have any more reasons to refuse.”

Sehwan laughed at Jinwoo’s facetious answer. “Wow, okay.”

The reply sounded like a joke, but Jinwoo had been genuine, and Sehwan knew that as well. Just like any other job, as detectives ranked up, they ended up getting chained to their desks. Jinwoo had wanted to continue doing fieldwork, and whenever possible, his superiors, especially Chief Jinchul Woo, had respected his wishes. However, that couldn’t last forever. After everything he had achieved, Jinwoo had run out of excuses to keep from being promoted, and he finally had no choice but to accept one.

“Don’t you have any higher aspirations? Like a higher position or making more money?”

Money, huh? Would Sehwan believe that at one point, Jinwoo had made more money than the largest law firms in the country at a younger age than Sehwan was now? Jinwoo thought back to when he’d run Ahjin Guild with Jinho but kept it to himself.

Talk about a nostalgic memory.

He wasn’t lost in his sea of memories for long. Before he got into the car with Sehwan, Jinwoo had to answer his phone.

Hmm?

It was a call from Haein.

Jinwoo went home earlier than usual after receiving Haein's call. He chuckled after seeing Sooho's drawings.

"I didn't know our son was such an artist."

Out of Sooho's drawings, Beru's picture caught his eye. No other five-year-old kid could draw an ant this well. Jinwoo wiped the proud smile off his face when Haein glared at him.

"Ahem. Well then....."

Haein couldn't help her giggle when she saw her husband's quick change of attitude. She spoke to him as if she was talking to herself.

"This is no laughing matter. Look at the last page."

"The last page?"

It was Sooho's picture of his home.

"According to Sooho, his 'huge dad' lives in this black land. Do you know.....? Why are you laughing?"

"Oh, nothing! I just remembered something funny."

Jinwoo laughed so hard he had tears in his eyes as he realized that was how Sooho referred to the Statue of the Monarch located in the center of the realm of eternal rest. He closed the sketchbook as he wiped his tears off his face.

Jinwoo's expression made it clear that he didn't think this was a big deal. However, Haein quietly sighed and told Jinwoo what the director of the kindergarten had told her.

"Apparently, kids are afraid of Sooho."

".....?" Jinwoo's smile dropped slightly. "They are?"

Looking worried, Haein nodded and continued her explanation. "Although he never bothers or yells at other kids, they act differently when he's nearby."

"....."

Jinwoo couldn't laugh this off. He stood frozen, his smile completely gone now. His worries were coming true.

Kids are.....

Kids were more innocent than adults. Not only were their thoughts immature, but they were innocently perceptive. While adults could control their emotions with logical thinking, kids relied more on their instincts, so they were probably trying to avoid Sooho because they could sense the shadow of death looming over him.

The power of the Shadow Monarch.....

The only reason the power hadn't led to disaster was because Jinwoo was the one wielding it. It was a horrifying weapon created by a god from another world and concealed inside his most loyal subject with the intention of using it to destroy everything he had created.

Now this power had been unintentionally passed to Sooho, and it grew stronger every day.

.....Sooho wouldn't be able to lead a normal life.

Until he could perfectly control his power, it would be necessary to suppress it. Jinwoo looked at the pictures hanging on the living room wall. Their wedding portrait was in the biggest frame, and many pictures of Sooho hung on either side of it.

Most of the boy's pictures were with shadow soldiers. In one picture, Sooho was grinning from ear to ear, riding on Beru's shoulders and yanking his two antennae. There was a picture of Sooho running away from Igris, who had volunteered to be his tutor. Another picture showed Sooho fighting Bellion with his toy sword. There were so many others besides those. One by one, Jinwoo began sending them to his inventory in another dimension.

"Honey.....?"

"Until Sooho can live with other humans without any issue.....I'm going to seal his power and his memories regarding the shadow soldiers."

Sooho would have to learn how to coexist with humans instead of shadow soldiers. Until then.....

When the last picture was placed in inventory, Beru quietly rose from the

shadows after finding out about Jinwoo's decision.

"My king....."

Jinwoo could sense that Beru treasured Sooho like his own, but Jinwoo had made up his mind. Realizing he couldn't change his king's mind, Beru lowered his head. That was when Beru noticed the drawings.

Jinwoo was holding the sketchbook toward Beru.

"Is this.....?"

Sooho drew a picture of you.

It was the greatest work of art Beru had ever seen. Tears welled in the ant's large eyes.

"My king..... May I say good-bye to the little master?"

With Jinwoo's permission, Beru cautiously entered Sooho's room.

Creeeak.

Sooho was in a deep sleep, and his steady breaths were like soft, sweet music to Beru's ears. Beru quietly knelt on one knee so as not to disturb him.

"My little lord..... I bid you farewell on behalf of all the shadow soldiers."

His low voice seemed to permeate Sooho's dream. The boy turned over and faced the direction the voice came from and began to talk in his sleep.

"Boss ant..... Boss ant....."

Sooho's pronunciation for the word *ant* was much better now than when he'd first started following Beru around. Beru gazed proudly upon Sooho.

"It was an honor to serve you, young master. Please stay in good health until next we meet....."

Beru kissed the top of Sooho's hand dangling over the edge of the bed. As he got up, the soldiers who had gathered beneath Beru's feet said their good-byes to him as well.

"Young master, please study hard even when I'm not with you....."

"Please be healthy, young master."

“W-waaaaaah.....”

With that, Beru turned around. Jinwoo nodded and approached Sooho silently. He tucked him in his blanket before placing his hand on Sooho’s forehead. Powerful magic flowed from Jinwoo’s fingertips. When Sooho opened his eyes, his abnormal powers and memories would be gone.

Sweet dreams.....

Jinwoo kissed his son on the forehead as he slept like an angel. He then closed the door to Sooho’s room.

Sooho danced with ants, knights, and orcs in his dreams all throughout the night.

3.

Beep, beep.

High school freshman Eunchul Lee had his radar on. It was a new school, a new classroom, and new classmates. Eunchul sat at the back of the class, scanning the environment and its inhabitants. Who would be his underlings and who would be his friends? With just one look, he quickly made his decisions.

The laws of the jungle applied in this classroom. Even in junior high, Eunchul had ruled with his fists, so many of these classmates looked like prey to him. Most of them averted their eyes when they made eye contact with Eunchul.

.....Weaklings.

However, one student approached him with a smile.

Sungho Cho.

Sungho was pretty famous in the neighborhood next to his. They had run into each other while out for drinks with other friends.

“You’re in this school, too?”

“Yeah.”

They briefly exchanged news about mutual friends, which disguised a subtle

power play. However, aware of Eunchul's notoriety, Sungho decided to back off quickly.

"Let's have a good three years."

Sungho extended his arm for a handshake. Eunchul grinned and took his hand. There may be a hierarchy in the classroom, but Eunchul considered Sungho to be a friend. As Eunchul observed the pecking order of the classroom, one student stood out to him.

The student wasn't a teacher's pet sitting at the front of the class, nor was he trying to act tough by lurking at the back of the classroom. He was a weirdo who dared to look Eunchul in the eye as he sat smack-dab in the middle of the classroom. There was always a guy like him in the class, some punk who was a little too full of himself and didn't understand his place until something happened to him.

The weirdo looked over his shoulder at Eunchul and sighed. Feeling judged, Eunchul couldn't take this sitting down.

Krrrk.

The sound of Eunchul dragging his chair back echoed throughout the classroom, and all eyes swiveled to him. Enjoying the attention, Eunchul cockily approached the punk.

"Hey."

But before Eunchul could grab his shoulder, something stopped him from behind.

"Hang on."

Eunchul was startled to see Sungho holding his wrist. "What gives?"

The tone of Eunchul's voice made Sungho swallow nervously. "We went to the same junior high school. Try to leave him alone."

".....The same junior high school?"

Sungho was protecting this jerk just because they had gone to the same school? There were only two possibilities here. There was some unspeakable reason for not bothering this guy that Eunchul didn't know about, or Eunchul

was getting looked down on.

Eunchul angrily kicked the chair of the jerk who was ignoring the commotion. “Who the hell do you think you are? Why don’t you say something? Don’t you have a mouth?”

In a panic, Sungho stepped forward to try and stop Eunchul. Losing his patience, Eunchul glared at Sungho and forcefully pushed his hand away.

“You, come with me.”

Two of his underlings from junior high school followed Eunchul out of the classroom. When he looked back at them from the doorway, he saw Sungho sweating up a storm while the other guy remained cool and aloof. The sight enraged Eunchul.

* * *

“Argh!” Sungho’s face was a mess of bruises as he stumbled back.

Eunchul glared daggers at him as he pushed Sungho against the wall. “Who the hell is that asshole? Why are you trying to protect him?”

Sungho spat saliva mixed with blood onto the ground. He looked exhausted as he raised his head. “He was the strongest guy in our school.”

“.....?”

Eunchul raised an eyebrow. Had Sungho lost his mind just because of a few punches? It was a fact that Sungho and his gang had ruled the schools in his respective neighborhood.

Yet Sungho shook his head for emphasis. “We couldn’t even lay a finger on him. I stopped you before you got hurt.”

Although Eunchul thought Sungho was talking nonsense, Sungho looked dead serious.

Is he.....for real?

But he hasn’t heard so much as a peep about this Sooho Sung guy. Eunchul had lived in this area ever since grade school, and he had never heard that name before. Sooho looked like a typical nerd, so what could he possibly do to Eunchul? Eunchul was pissed at Sungho for humiliating him over a guy like that.

Smack!

Eunchul slapped Sungho with everything he had. Sungho's head jerked hard to one side, and his cheek was soon red and swollen. Eunchul had been boxing from a young age, and his arm strength was no joke.

However, Sungho was more afraid of something else. Up until now, Sungho had been suffering Eunchul's violence in silence. But at that moment, he spotted something in the distance.

.....!

Seeing Sungho's eyes widen, Eunchul looked back over his shoulder. The nerd was approaching them in the distance.

Sungho lowered his head, not wanting to make eye contact with Sooho, and he mumbled under his breath. "Just..... Just apologize to him. I'm telling you, listen to me."

"Are you kidding me?!"

Eunchul grabbed Sungho by his hair and shook him, but Sungho kept his mouth shut. Even before Eunchul could yell anything else, Sooho was standing right in front of them. Perhaps because of what Sungho had said earlier, but even though Eunchul would usually punch first, he stepped away from Sungho and kept a cautious eye on Sooho.

Sooho wasn't short, but he wasn't tall, either, especially compared to Eunchul or Sungho, who were bigger than the average tenth grader. Sooho also had an average build. Although the parts of Sooho visible outside his school uniform, like his neck and wrists, looked firm, he didn't seem like he practiced martial arts or anything. For this reason, Eunchul wasn't buying what Sungho had said.

Meanwhile, Sooho ignored Eunchul as he inspected Sungho's messed-up face.

Tsk, tsk.

Sooho sucked his teeth out of pity for Sungho. "Sungho."

".....Yeah?"

"Let's say that you did this, okay? With injuries that bad, you can argue it was in self-defense."

Sungho nodded without any hesitation. "Sure."

Did what? Eunchul couldn't follow what they were talking about.

"Hey!"

He grabbed Sooho by the shoulder to turn him around. A light suddenly flashed before Eunchul's eyes.

Thud!

Eunchul passed out and fell to the ground. At almost the same time, Eunchul's two underlings who were standing behind him were knocked out as well.

Thud! Thud!

What a scary guy.....

Sungho was amazed. If it wasn't for his keen vision honed through sports training, he wouldn't have been able to follow Sooho's movements. Sooho had thrown a punch at Eunchul's face as well as each of his underlings' weak spots. They were accurate and merciless like the attack of a wild animal.

Sungho had once picked a fight with Sooho and ended up wondering if his strength was superhuman. After that incident, his school life had become unexpectedly uneventful. Sungho sighed as he looked at the fallen Eunchul and his gang.

.....

Eunchul's nose was broken, and his underlings had fractured bones. Word of the incident had spread quickly. The great Eunchul Lee from XX Junior High was defeated by Sungho Cho from YY Junior High. Eunchul kept his mouth shut after that, not wanting people to know that he'd gotten knocked unconscious by some random kid.

So.....

With that, another victory had been added to Sungho's record. He felt quite embarrassed that someone else had handed him the win.

While Sungho was lost in thought, Sooho approached him to shake his hand.

"Considering how things have turned out..... Let's watch each other's backs in

high school, too, okay?”

Sungho scratched his cheek as he quietly took Sooho’s hand. Well..... It wasn’t a bad deal for Sungho.

* * *

“Wow, did Sungho really beat those three up?”

“No wonder. From the moment I first saw him, I knew he was tough.”

“I heard he’s been studying judo ever since he was little and was quite famous in his neighborhood.”

“Should I learn judo, too?”

The classroom was abuzz with the news that Eunchul and his gang had been taken to a hospital. Kids began treating Sungho as a hero because he had fought Eunchul’s gang in order to protect a classmate he had gone to junior high with. Although some students still felt awkward with each other since it was the beginning of a new school year, they all had a lot of things to say about the fight.

Meanwhile, amid all the chatter, Sooho looked out the window in a daze. It was already near the end of the school day, so the sky was turning a warm amber. Sooho had to force himself to stifle several yawns.

.....I’m bored.

These days, Sooho had much cause for yawning. He was so bored. In the back of his mind, he felt a nostalgic inkling for surprising and exciting things. Whenever he felt this, it made the boredom even more unbearable.

Shhp.

The classroom back door opened. All the students turned toward it. Sungho entered and went straight to his seat without a word.

Oof.....

Everyone stared sympathetically at Sungho’s injured face. Still, Sungho had now dethroned Eunchul as the boss of the classroom.

“Hey.....”

Sooho was still focused outside the window when someone poked him in the back. He turned around to face a female classmate.

“He’s like that because of you. Aren’t you gonna thank him?”

“.....I already did.”

“Oh, okay.”

The embarrassed girl hastily opened a textbook upon hearing Sooho’s short reply. Sooho returned to looking outside again.

So bored.....

The sun was now setting.

* * *

It was time to go home. As everyone exited the classroom as fast as they could, Sooho was left behind standing in front of a window, looking out at the schoolyard. A steady stream of students left through the school gates.

Sooho didn’t like being in crowds. His mom always told him with a smile that he was just like his dad in that regard. Instead, Sooho passed the time by reading a book he had borrowed from the library. When he finally looked up to start heading home, there was no one left in the classroom.

Sooho took his time packing his bag and slung it over his shoulder. It was good to take his time, but he would be late for dinner at this rate, which would mean he would have to face an angry mom. If things ended there, he would be lucky. But if his dad heard that he made his mom angry.....

Ugh, I don’t want to even imagine it.

Sooho suddenly had goose bumps. He shook his head. How old would his dad have to be to finally stop being so scary? Sooho figured he would never win against him even in his old age. As Sooho quivered, he ran toward the closed back door of the classroom. But when he tried to open it.....

I can’t.....open the door?

If the door was simply locked, it would at least move, given the amount of force Sooho had applied. But the door didn’t even move an inch, like he was trying to pull a wall.

What's going on?

Sooho's eyes widened as he ran to the front door of the classroom and grabbed the doorknob. The front door was the same. Surprised, Sooho ran to the window and looked outside.

An unbelievable scene unfolded before his eyes. The students heading out the gate, the students training in their respective sports teams, the cars on the road, the people on the sidewalks, and even a ball in midair—everything had stopped moving.

How is that possible.....?

Sooho struck the window as hard as he could with both fists.

Bam!

But instead of the windows breaking, his fists bounced back as if the glass was made of rubber.

.....!

That's when it happened. As he moved away from the window to try and figure things out, Sooho spotted a black hole suddenly appear at the back of the classroom.

The hole was the size of a volleyball at first, but it kept growing bigger until it was large enough for a person to pass through it. It was a door of darkness that looked like it would suck him in. An ordinary kid would've been scared out of their mind, but Sooho placed his hand on his chest instead of crying or screaming.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

His heart was pounding. Maybe Sooho had been expecting this kind of thing to happen for some time.

Mom did always say I'm just like Dad.

What would his dad do in such a situation? He already knew the answer.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

His feet had followed his heart to the front of the gate, so he reached for the

surface.

Bzzt, bzzt!

Despite the electric sparks, he felt no pain. Rather, as he stood there, Sooho felt relaxed, as if he had returned to his hometown after being away for a long time. He had a funny feeling that he had been in and out of this place before.

He slowly took a deep breath. His heart began to calm as his head cleared.

It was time. A smile showed on Sooho's face for a moment. Then, without hesitation, he ran inside the gate.

4.

After walking through a long tunnel-like darkness, Sooho surveyed his surroundings. He was in the hallway of a building that seemed old. The only light brightening the place was a single torch hanging on the wall.

What is this.....?

As he looked around, Sooho narrowed his eyes to adjust to the low light. The way back.....was blocked. Sooho examined the sturdy wall behind him and shook his head. He couldn't feel empty space on the other side of the wall.

I guess there's no way to go except forward.

The flame of the torch flickered. Sooho took the torch down from the wall to light his way ahead.

"Whoa!"

Weapons were displayed in an orderly manner on the walls on either side of him. Swords, daggers, bows, spears, maces, *etc.* An endless array in the quiet darkness, as if they were awaiting their owners.

In a daze, Sooho checked out the weapons and swallowed hard. Why were there weapons here like this? It was obvious.

I have to pick one.....

Sooho was more serious than he'd ever been. He didn't know why he had

been brought to this place. But if there was an exit at the end of this path, the weapon he chose would become his trusty companion.

However, there was something off. Why did it feel like everything he felt was amplified? His heart had never pounded this hard when he ran around with his friends or when he played a video game someone had recommended. But here it was racing like crazy.

Sooho's eyes twinkled excitedly as he scanned the weapons.

Okay.....

He checked out every weapon carefully, then turned around and checked them all out once more. A few of them caught his eye, but one particular set of weapons drew his attention. Sooho stuck the torch in the wall behind him and carefully put them on.

Clung, clung.

His hands fit perfectly within the gauntlets as if they had been made for him. Unlike other weapons that needed some getting used to, Sooho's fists were his most used and most powerful weapons.

This is it.

As Sooho admired the gauntlets, he folded each finger down one at a time.

Fwoosh!

All the torches ahead lit up at once. A long hallway stretched forever deeper and deeper inside like a secret passage within an ancient castle. It felt like something was going to happen soon. As he attempted to calm his heart and move forward, Sooho noticed daggers on display nearby.

.....Who would use such lame weapons?

Sooho slowly walked away from the pair of daggers that now somehow looked sad.

* * *

Sooho cautiously made his way down the hallway. "Is anybody here?"

When he checked to see if anyone was around, no answer came. He sensed

no presence at all. He'd been walking for a while, but instead of being tired, he remained alert of his surroundings.

The flames of the torches crackled along the walls of the classic-looking architecture decorated with medieval armor.

Is this the basement of a castle or something?

As he proceeded ahead, Sooho became more and more curious about where he was and why he'd been summoned here.

Wait a minute.

Sooho felt a chill and walked back the way he had just come until he was standing in front of a suit of armor. Oddly enough, the armor was in a different position from when he'd first walked past it.

Was it.....holding the sword up like that earlier?

The tip of the sword was definitely pointing toward the ground before. When Sooho tilted his head and took a step closer to inspect the suit, the sword came down at him.

Klang!

Had Sooho not hurriedly pushed the sword aside with his gauntlet, it would have split his head in two.

“What the hell?!”

Without giving him time to be surprised, the suit of armor dropped its sword and leaped at Sooho to strangle him.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Sooho urgently drove his gauntlets into the armor, crushing its helmet noisily until it stopped moving.

“Huff, huff, huff!”

As he kicked the armor away, Sooho struggled to catch his breath. Fortunately, he wasn't hurt, but his heart was racing like crazy.

Wait a minute. What if this wasn't the only moving armor on display here? And what if all of them had hostile feelings toward him? He thought about the

decorative armor he had passed by without much thought until now. That wasn't the last of them. There was another one right in front of him and even more armor lining the path ahead.

Sure enough.....

Clink, clink!

The metallic sound of armored joints moving. One by one, suits of armor came to life, and the weapons they brandished were gleaming.

“Oh.....”

As Sooho clenched his fists tightly, he regretted not choosing a mace. With that, the suits of armor quickly rushed at him.

* * *

Ka-boom!

Once Sooho had defeated the last suit of armor, he heard the announcement again.

[You have leveled up!]

[Level: 19]

“Whew.” Sooho bent over and exhaled. Strangely, his fatigue went away after hearing the message. And that wasn't all. His breathing had returned to normal. He threw a punch.

Shoom!

His fist shot forward like a bullet. A mysterious power coursed through his whole body.

“So that's how it works.”

It was simple. After he defeated the living armor, his level went up. He got stronger as he leveled up. Naturally, he was able to defeat these monsters easily. It was a simple but effective cycle.

Sooho looked back down the hallway he had just walked. In his wake was a pile of broken armor. He smacked his lips.

Too bad.....

He wished he could level up a little more. He wanted to get a bit stronger. Alas, all good things must come to an end.

Soocho stared at the huge door in front of him. His perception also sharpened as he leveled up, and it detected a powerful being inside, which was why he wished he could level up even more. After closing his eyes and using a deep-breathing technique he had learned from his father, Socho pushed the door with both hands.

Creeeak!

The heavy door moved.

Inside was a huge lair. Socho walked past the pillars lining either side of him until he reached the farthest part of the lair, where he found a throne. Feeling nervous, he felt his body stiffen.

A suit of armor sat on the throne. Socho sensed its strength was on a different level from the other monsters.

That's the one.....

He had sensed its chilling existence from the other side of the door.

The monster slowly got up and walked down the steps of the throne's platform. It was a black knight with a red mane on its helmet. The energy he sensed from the knight gave Socho the shivers, but somehow, he couldn't help but laugh. The excitement was palpable enough to make the hair on his arms stand up.

Shiing!

The knight unsheathed his sword. Socho thought he needed to strike first, before the knight reached him. But as Socho was about to make his move, the knight was already in his face. The sword the knight was swinging suddenly lit up.

“.....Huh?”

A bright light blinded Socho.

* * *

“Gah!” Socho quickly sat up and nervously scanned the area, but the black

knight was nowhere to be seen. In fact, Sooho wasn't even in its lair anymore. He was back where he had started.

What just happened?

Sooho's legs buckled, and he dropped to the floor.

I thought I was going to die!

Thinking of the moment the knight had struck him gave him chills.

"So do I have to go down the same path again?"

As he reluctantly rose to his feet, Sooho realized that something was different from before: the torches at the starting point.

Fwooooosh!

There had been exactly three torches with blue flames, but one of the flames had gone out. Could it be a coincidence? No. The weapons being displayed before the starting point, the levels going up when he defeated a monster, his body getting stronger based on the level...

None of it was random. Sooho had a revelation.

I'm not going to die.....

In this strange place, there was no suffering or death. Instead, a blue flame represented how many opportunities he had. But if all three flames went out..... Sooho couldn't even guess what would happen at that point.

If that's the case.....

He would have to be more cautious. Sooho's eyes were much sharper than when he first started. He'd give it another go, and this time, he wouldn't waste the opportunity.

Bam!

Sooho resolved as he smashed an oncoming armor monster.

* * *

"Argh! Gaaaaah!"

Having returned to the starting point, Sooho rolled around the ground. It

wasn't because he was in pain, of course. It was because he was frustrated that he had lost another opportunity. He struck the ground as tears welled up in his eyes; he was that upset.

After blowing off some steam, he cautiously looked up, and sure enough, there was one less blue flame. Only a single torch remained.

That black knight is too strong!

There was a huge gap of power between Sooho and the black knight. It was an imbalance of power and practically cheating. He wouldn't be able to beat it like this.

"Ahhhhh!" Sooho rolled around the ground some more.

After a while, he got tired and leaned against the wall to look at the path. He wasn't sure where the suits of armor were coming from, but they had reappeared and were guarding the same places.

"Aren't you tired of this already?"

This was the third time they were going to face each other. Sooho almost felt glad to see them at this point.

"Ugh."

He kept sighing as if he were trying to sink into the ground.

"Huh?"

Something suddenly popped into his head. He turned toward the armor monsters again.

When did they reappear?

He'd assumed they just reappeared when he returned to the starting point. But maybe that wasn't the case. What if they respawned after a certain time had passed?

Ba-dump!

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

There was a ray of hope left after all.

Let's just try it and see.

Soocho destroyed the suits of armor near the entrance and then returned to the starting point to wait. He sat down and leaned against the wall to observe the changes in the monsters. After some time had passed.....

Fsst... Fsst...

One by one, the dead armor monsters turned to sand and were absorbed into the ground.

Soocho's eyes widened.

.....!

Then sand gathered to form brand-new decorative armors where the monsters once stood.

"Yes!" Socho pumped his fists.

He had the answer. The armored beings helped him level up, and thankfully, they respawned after a certain time. So what Socho needed to do was smash these monsters again and again until he reached a level that matched the black knight's power.

Soocho smiled as he stood up. The glint in his eye made the armored monsters uneasy.

* * *

Level 70. No matter how many more suits of armor he went after, Socho's level didn't go any higher than that. But that was good enough.

A black aura slowly rose from his shoulders. He didn't know what this black aura was, but he knew one thing. Powerful energy was coursing through his body.

Soocho forced open the door to the lair where the black knight was located. Unlike the last two battles, the black knight was waiting for Socho near the door. This brought a smile to Socho's face.

"Did I keep you waiting?"

In response, the black knight pulled out his sword. Somehow, Socho thought

the black knight was smiling back at him.

Now at level 70, he released all mana from his body. The ground rumbled, and debris was thrown into the air.

“It’s my turn now.”

5.

The knight was about thirty meters away.

.....Let’s go!

When Sooho concentrated, time seemed to move much slower for his surroundings, and he was able to see things he hadn’t been able to before. The tip of the sword the black knight was swinging crackled with blue lightning as it headed straight for him.

So that’s what it was!

Soocho could now see the powerful attack that had quickly ended their two previous bouts. His agility and perception had increased a lot. They now operated at the highest level. Sooho moved one step forward to avoid the lightning coming straight at him.

Tmp.

Soocho leaped fifteen meters forward in a single bound, cutting the distance between him and the monster in half.

Kra-koom!

A second bolt of lightning barely cleared Sooho’s head. The black knight had shifted positions and immediately attempted another attack. Amazed by the knight’s reaction time, Sooho took another step forward, which brought him right up to the knight.

Crunk.

Soocho clenched his fist in one of his gauntlets.

He’s in my space now.

Sooho could sense the black knight was tensing up. Grateful that leveling up had given him such a boost, he threw a direct punch.

Whoosh!

He landed a solid hit on the knight. His punch was so powerful, it was more like a cannon ball than a bullet.

Pow!

Before the black knight could raise his sword for a block, Sooho's gauntlet had already sent him flying.

Craaaaaack!

The black knight's boots left gouges on the tile, barely stopping his backward trajectory.

.....!

That's when he realized that there was a pillar behind him. Flustered, the black knight looked forward to see Sooho blocking his way.

Did he mean to.....corner me here?

While he was impressed by his opponent's clever move, the black knight reflexively raised his sword. Sooho could see his eyes reflected in the sword emitting a cold blue light. He held his breath and used a gauntlet to block the sword as it came at him at an angle. Sooho took a big step forward, leaving no room between him and the knight, and threw another punch. This time, it connected with the black knight's chest.

Kapow!

It was powerful enough to blow the knight away, but he was instead shoved into the pillar behind him, cracking it with the impact. And there was more where that shockingly destructive power came from. Sooho dealt a series of attacks in a row.

Pow, pow, pow, pow, pow, pow, pow!

The black knight, Igris, admired Sooho's strikes as he blocked them, as they reminded him of his king's.

So the young master is already this powerful despite not being at full strength yet?

His father had become a godlike being, and his mother used to be an S-rank awakened being. The potential of the child born to the two was beyond Igris's imagination.

Crack!

Bit by bit, the attacks tore away his armor. Although Igris was operating at maximum speed, it wasn't good enough to block all of Sooho's attacks.

Klang!

Barely able to block Sooho's powerful strikes, Igris's sword eventually broke. It was over. As he watched the weapon shatter into pieces, Igris realized that the battle was done. But the loss made Igris's heart leap, just like when he had met Jinwoo here for the first time.

For the final blow, Sooho concentrated his mana in his fist.

Vwoom!

The mana spread out around him in waves.

Boom!

His fist penetrated the black knight's stomach and left a huge hole. The black knight slammed into the pillar and slowly slid down to the ground. There was no sign of further movement.

.....

Sooho carefully poked the black knight and let out the breath he had been holding.

"Hwoo!"

He had won. He had won against an opponent he thought he would never defeat. Joy emanated from deep within his heart.

But against expectations, nothing changed.

It's.....not over yet?

Sooho slowly looked around and discovered a newly spawned gate at the bottom of some stairs not far from the throne. His eyes widened. That had to be the exit! Sooho smiled, thinking the end of this adventure was near, whatever the reason for this adventure was. He gladly ran toward the gate and threw his body into it immediately. After traveling through a dark tunnel just like at the entrance to this place, Sooho opened his eyes.

“Skreeeeeeeee!”

“Skraaaah!”

“.....”

This time, it was screaming, human-size humanoid ants.

* * *

“Hff, hff! What is with these insane ants?”

As he looked at the ants he had just defeated, Sooho tried to catch his breath. Ironically, Sooho had always liked ants since he was a kid, and he always tried to avoid stepping on them whenever he came across an army of them. But now he was having regrets about that.

These ants were vicious and powerful. The armor monsters paled in comparison.

Still, the good thing about these ants is.....

He’d begun to level up again, and rapidly, as soon as he battled these ants.

Shf, shf.

Sooho heard the footsteps of ants coming from somewhere. He regained his composure and clenched his fist.

Krik!

“Skraaaah!”

“Skrah!”

Having learned his lesson from dealing with the black knight, Sooho focused on leveling up by hitting every corner of the cave. Within the mazelike area, the screams of ant monsters echoed throughout. It felt like he’d been hunting them

forever.

Okay.....

Once he stopped leveling up, Sooho entered the last room of the cave. It was a huge empty chamber. Another lair. Despite the limited lighting in the boss's lair, it was no problem for Sooho because of his raised perception.

This room is huge, so how big is whatever lives here?

Despite his worries, Sooho spotted a single humanoid ant standing at the end of the lair with his back to him. Unlike the other ants, this one had wings.

Is it just the one?

The atmosphere of this chamber was like that of the lair of the black knight. But unlike the knight, Sooho couldn't detect the ant's power level. Was it weak or strong?

Curious, Sooho cautiously made his way over to the ant. When he was close enough, the ant suddenly turned toward him without making any noise.

Gulp!

Sooho was startled and took a step back, not out of fear but out of surprise. Strangely, the ant seemed to be crying. Although he knew he couldn't communicate with the monster, Sooho couldn't bring himself to make the first attack, either. Even though the normal reaction would be to freak out over the human-size crying insect, Sooho somehow felt like he should console the ant.

His compassion for the monster didn't last long, though. Sooho picked up on some powerful energy and jumped back.

.....?

The ant wiped his tears with the back of his hand, as if trying to pull himself together.

Damn.....

Shocked by the ant's incredible power, Sooho looked at the hair standing on his arm. Compared to the black knight, the ant was on a completely different level. Sooho had goosebumps all over his body.

Huh.....?

A shadow fell across him, and when he looked up, the ant was right in front of him. It had grown twice as big and let out a frightening roar.

“Skraaaaaaah!”

* * *

He was relieved. Exhausted, Sooho lay on the ground thinking things over.

The winged ant had been an insane enemy. Yet he seemed hesitant and held back his attacks at crucial points. Because of that, although it was a close call, Sooho was able to defeat the ant.

“Ugh.....”

Sooho sat up, stretching his aching body. A new gate had spawned, the reward for beating a formidable foe.

He checked his level.

[Level: 99]

His level stopped at 99. In most video games, 99 was the highest level attainable.

I guess I can go home now.

Sooho’s heart pounded in anticipation. He gladly jumped through the next gate. But when he opened his eyes.....

“Huh? What?”

“Grrrr.....”

All he could see were giants and dragons.

“Ugh.”

* * *

It was one thing after another. Sooho made mountains of the corpses of giants and dragons, piling them up as he made his way down a path through a large field. His level was still 99, but because he was better able to control his power during these battles, his confidence was at an all-time high.

Eventually, Sooho discovered another black knight waiting for him at the end of the path.

.....

Unlike the black knight with the red mane on his helmet, this knight had a much larger frame, and the scars of broken wings were evident on his back. This knight was strong. Perhaps stronger than the ant Sooho had fought earlier. However.....

.....It's a red herring.

Sooho was certain about that, because he could sense the real boss floating above his head. At the overwhelming presence, Sooho looked up.

Kraaaaah!

A wyvern flying in the sky cried out loud. Following that cry, someone dismounted from its back and fell to the ground. After what seemed like an endless descent, the figure gently landed, kicking up a cloud of dust and leaving a big dent in the ground.

Thud!

Sooho swallowed hard.

That's the one.....

The mysterious figure, whose hood was pulled down low to hide his face, emitted energy that made it hard for Sooho to breathe. When the figure landed, the knight paused in drawing his sword and took a few steps back, as if retreating from the battle.

I was right.

Struggling to catch his breath, Sooho put some strength into his shaky legs.

This was the first time that a human had appeared instead of some monster.

“Excuse me!”

When Sooho attempted to talk to the man, he only smiled beneath his hood and remained silent.

“Okay, seriously.....?”

Soocho gave up on making conversation but went wide-eyed when he noticed something.

Is that.....?

For the first time, a gate spawned before Socho had defeated an enemy. The gate was directly behind the hooded man.

Does this mean.....?

This was probably the last battle. Socho could go back home if he defeated this man. With that conclusion, his body began to move. His level had peaked to its highest, and his fighting skills had improved to the same heights.

Ba-dump, ba-dump!

Soocho's pulse quickened, and it felt like his heart was about to explode.

Tok! Tok! Tok!

Traveling faster than the speed of sound, Socho charged at his adversary until he was right in front of him. At this distance, Socho delivered a series of punches that should've been inescapable. Yet the man evaded the attacks easily by simply tilting his head one way or the other.

At that moment, in slow motion, Socho saw the face of the man beneath the hood.

".....Dad?"

The man grinned. "It's not time yet."

The palm of the man approached Socho faster than the speed of light. He shut his eyes tight. Soon, all he could see was light.

* * *

"Gah!"

Soocho bolted upright in his chair and looked around. He was inside his classroom after school, and the air was calm and clear. Socho wiped off his sweaty forehead.

What a strange dream.

Had he played too many video games lately? The final boss at the end of a

dungeon crawl was his own dad. The dream was too embarrassing to share with anyone. Sooho was glad it was just a dream.

He let out a sigh of relief and turned to see a female student standing there, frozen like a block of ice. Apparently, Sooho waking up so abruptly had startled her.

Sooho broke the ice. “Aren’t you going home?”

Upon closer inspection, Soohoo realized it was the girl who had poked him earlier.

“I’m in charge of the classroom chores this week, so.....I have to lock the door.”

As she stammered out those words, Sooho casually asked, “Do you need a hand?”

“What?” The girl was taken aback by the unexpected offer but nodded shyly. “.....Sure.”

* * *

Meanwhile, Jinwoo, Beru, and Igris stood on the roof of the school.

Igris spoke first. “My lord..... Isn’t this an acceptable time to restore the young master’s power?”

Jinwoo had tested Sooho a few times before, too, but this was the first time his son had reached Jinwoo. Sooho had passed the test with flying colors, and Igris wanted to give him a pass.

But Jinwoo answered with a smile on his face. “Do you think I could’ve defeated the Dragon King if I thought my own strength was enough, and I jumped into battle right away?”

Igris shook his head.

That was what Jinwoo wanted to teach Sooho. Regardless of how powerful he was, he could retreat from a situation whenever victory wasn’t assured. There was nothing brave about rushing thoughtlessly into battle.

That’s just reckless and foolish.

Even though Sooho had felt that he couldn't have won, he had nonetheless challenged Jinwoo. His courage might have been admirable, but as his father, for Jinwoo that was cause for concern.

Not yet. It wasn't time yet. Sooho was a smart kid and would soon figure out the right way to use his power.

"Young master....." Beru was teary-eyed again as he gazed at the sketchbook containing his portrait.

Jinwoo gently patted the disappointed Beru on the shoulder and leaned over the guardrail to look down at the campus. He saw his son heading out the school gate with a girl from his class. Jinwoo then rested his chin on his hand and smiled as he spoke.

"It's been a while, so maybe I should take the family out for dinner tonight."

6.

"Dongsuk and Dongsoo Hwang, the swindler brothers who swept the nation, were arrested today....."

Bleep.

The TV playing the news in the office of the violent crimes investigation unit was turned off. Jinwoo set down the remote, stood, and put on his jacket.

Sehwan looked up from his paperwork. "Huh? You leaving, Jinwoo?"

"Yeah, I've got plans."

"Gotcha, sir."

Jinwoo smiled at his partner's joking salute and left the office.

With his arms folded, Sehwan watched Jinwoo head out. "Weird. He always leaves the office early on this date every year."

Hang on. Sehwan looked at the calendar on the wall, and it hit him.

"Oh, today must be....."

Yoonho Baek's face was covered in soot.

"Whew."

Just now, he and his crew had stopped a huge wildfire that had threatened to spread into a residential area nearby. It took more than fifty firetrucks and helicopters and eight hundred firefighters to secure this victory.

Yoonho looked around. His exhausted colleagues were sitting or lying on the ground here and there. Yet no one had a negative expression on their face. Some even smiled or gave Yoonho a thumbs-up when he looked at them. He responded with a thumbs-up as well.

They had been able to put out the fire with no fatalities or injuries. Considering the scale of the fire, this was nothing short of a miracle. Although everyone was beat from wrestling with the fire all night, the firefighters celebrated by congratulating one another. Yoonho was just as pleased as they were.

"Yikes, that's cold."

He was startled to feel something cold on his neck. When he turned to look, Captain Ilhwan Sung stood there with a bottle of water.

"Thank you."

Yoonho took the bottle gratefully. Ilhwan sat beside him and took a drink of his own bottled water.

Ilhwan Sung was known as the captain of many battles. He might even be the greatest captain. And today had been another brilliant performance. Yoonho was proud to be on the same team as Ilhwan. The soot on Ilhwan's face was a badge of honor.

Someday, I'll be just like.....

After glancing at the senior firefighter Yoonho respected so much, he poured the leftover water from the bottle onto his head.

"Ahhh....."

He felt much better now as the heat in his body was washed away.

“Oh.”

Suddenly, he remembered a scene from the past. The profile of a man Yoonho had seen on that day!

“Captain!”

Startled, Ilhwan turned to look at Yoonho. “Yeah?”

“You remember that huge fire at Daesung Tower, right? Our team almost died because we were trapped.”

“Of course I do.”

As Ilhwan and his team were losing consciousness, a mysterious figure had appeared. After saving the trapped firefighters, the figure had vanished without a trace. Some people thought the firefighters were delirious and seeing things.

“I got a look at the man’s profile before I passed out.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but he looked just like.....”

But before Yoonho could continue, Ilhwan unwrapped a pastry he had brought with the waters and shoved it into Yoonho’s mouth.

“Mmph, mmph.” Yoonho looked confused as he chewed on the pastry and swallowed. “Captain?”

Ilhwan smiled as he silently took a bite of his own pastry. A chilly breeze blew in from elsewhere and cooled down the exhausted firefighters.

* * *

Inside a meeting room located on the highest floor of a skyscraper.....

“Mr. Chairman?”

“.....”

“Are you all right, sir?”

Jinho barely managed to contain his smile. “Yes, I’m fine. Then.....”

Jinho went through the documents in front of him. When he looked up, he noted the faces of his employees in the meeting room. A little embarrassed, he

smiled.

“So, what were we talking about?”

“.....”

The employees were stunned that their boss hadn't been paying attention for the last thirty minutes. But the meeting proceeded shortly after in a calm manner.

“We were saying that we need to decide the title of the new VR game our company is releasing soon.”

“Oh, right.” Jinho nodded but couldn't hold it in any longer. He stood up and yelled, “Everyone! My wife is six weeks pregnant!”

The joy he couldn't contain was now all over his face. Silence filled the room, but it didn't last long. Soon, documents were sent flying as the employees happily cheered.

“Congratulations, Chairman Yoo!”

“Congratulations, sir!”

“Our CEO will be a father soon!”

Jinho walked around the meeting room exchanging high fives with his employees who were happy as if the news were their own. His lovely wife, a baby on the way, and his game development company, which had released several hit games in a row. What a beautiful world it was.

Oh!

Jinho felt inspired and stood on a desk to confidently declare something to everyone. “*Beautiful World!*”

Naturally, everyone stared at him.

“Pardon, sir?”

The employees thought they had heard something wrong, but Jinho confirmed that they had heard him right.

“I'm talking about the title for our new game! Let's call the new game *Beautiful World!*”

Silence filled the room again.

“.....Are you serious, sir?”

Jinho answered without any hesitation. “Of course I am. *Beautiful World* fits the game perfectly because it will create the perfect VR— Hang on, why’re you.....?! Wait! I’m gonna fall!”

As Jinho resisted his employees’ attempts to get him off the desk, he suddenly looked outside the window.

Huh? Did I just see something fly by?

Surrounded by complaining employees, Jinho was quickly distracted from that thought.

“Sir, please, think again.....”

“The fate of our company rests on this game!”

“Do you really think *Beautiful World* fits?”

“You’re joking, right?”

Despite his staff rejecting and even poking fun at his naming sense, Jinho couldn’t help but be happy in this moment. So what if he sucked at naming things? The world was still beautiful to him. Jinho mumbled to himself as he gazed out the window where he could see the sun shining.

Maybe I should ask the boss what to name the baby?

* * *

Chairman Jinho Yoo of Ahjin Software, the Success Story of a Young Entrepreneur Who Refused to Succeed His Family Business!

Shhk, shhk.

The sound of scissors cutting out a newspaper article permeated the chairman’s office of Yoojin Construction. Chairman Myunghan Yoo finished his scrapbooking and looked up.

“Are there any other articles?”

Secretary Kim shook his head as he held a bunch of newspapers in his hands.

“.....I see.” Chairman Yoo closed the scrapbook with a dissatisfied look on his face. “After he turned down a position within our company, he establishes a game company of all things..... Tsk, tsk.”

Secretary Kim stared at one corner of Chairman Yoo’s desk. There sat a pile of newspapers that had articles of Jinho cut out of them. Not only that, but Chairman Yoo had done the clipping himself.

.....

Secretary Kim feigned a cough to keep a laugh from escaping his mouth. At that moment, Chairman Yoo turned his head toward the window.

“.....?”

Concerned, Secretary Kim walked over to the window. “Is there something wrong, sir?”

“No.....nothing.”

They were on the top floor of a skyscraper. There was no way anything just passed by that wasn’t some bird or something.

Chairman Yoo shook his head and handed the scrapbook over to his secretary. Secretary Kim carefully took it and placed it on a shelf. It was the fourth of its kind. Chairman Yoo’s precious and secret collection, known only to him and Secretary Kim, continued to grow.

* * *

On a peaceful street, Sooho was walking along with the girl in his class he’d grown friendly with. They were in the middle of making an important decision regarding who was going to carry their backpacks.

“Rock, paper...”

The girl’s game face added to the weight of the match. Soon, it was judgment time.

“...scissors!”

After seeing the girl choose rock with his extraordinary vision and dynamic reflexes, Sooho changed his choice from paper to scissors.

“Yay!”

The girl cheered and proudly handed over her backpack. Sooho took it with a chuckle and slung it over his other shoulder.

“You really suck at rock-paper-scissors.”

“I guess so.”

“What do you do with a man who’s so awful at rock-paper-scissors?”

“Maybe I should learn from you.”

With a backpack over each shoulder, Sooho walked ahead with a smile on his face.

“Hey, wait up!”

The two teenagers shared small talk as they walked side by side down a quiet alley. Sooho suddenly stopped walking and raised his head to look up at the sky.

.....?

The girl followed his gaze, but there was nothing to see except clouds quietly floating by.

“What is it? See something up there?”

Sooho stared at the sky for a while, then looked at the girl and grinned.
“Nope, nothing.”

* * *

“Roaaaar!”

As Haein and Jinwoo coasted through the sky on top of a flying dragon, she asked, “Are you sure this is okay, honey?”

“It’s fine.”

Jinwoo had explained to her that no one could see or hear Kaisal because he had concealed the dragon’s presence with a magic spell.

“Hang on tight.”

Haein held on to Jinwoo’s waist even tighter as Jinwoo made Kaisal go faster.

“Roar!”

Kaisel's wings flapped quickly, bringing them above the clouds. The big blue world spread out beneath them.

A little more!

Rooooar!

The dragon's wings went even faster, taking them higher and higher. Jinwoo and Haein were protected by a magic spell as they left the atmosphere and approached outer space. From here, they could see the sun looming large over the horizon.

Leaning on her husband's shoulder, Haein took in the amazing scenery with a smile on her face. Seeing his chance, Jinwoo broke out a gift he had brought with him.

Haein's eyes went wide. "Oh, honey.....!"

It was a special necklace Jinwoo had asked the crafty bearded dwarves to make for him. He lovingly put the beautiful necklace around his wife's neck as it reflected the sunlight. From the shadows, Jinwoo's soldiers cheered in celebration of their master's wedding anniversary.

Yeaaaahhh!

Jinwoo and Haein leaned in for a kiss, but right before their lips touched each other.....

"You should go home first, hon. I'll be back soon."

It was their sixteenth anniversary, so Haein knew the drill by now.

"You'll hurry home, right?"

Jinwoo nodded and ordered Kaisel to return to Earth. He watched in silence as his wife got farther and farther away. Then he turned around.

Sure enough, a part of space was twisted and distorted. A blue fog emerged from the rift, then began to gather and form into a figure.

Jinwoo recalled what the envoy of the Rulers had said to him in the past.

He said a powerful being can attract horrifying things from another world to their own, like a magnet.

It was clear who the blue fog monster was here for. As the number of rifts in space increased, the number of blue fog monsters rapidly increased as well. Several hundred? Several thousand? Maybe tens of thousands?

“Hwoo.”

Jinwoo closed his eyes and breathed deeply, as he was wont to do.

Would Sooho be here with Jinwoo someday? Jinwoo wasn't sure, but it was certainly a nice thought.

Father and son facing our foes together.....

Jinwoo opened his eyes with a smile.

All the blue monsters had finished surfacing from the gap between dimensions and noticed Jinwoo's presence. They emitted a terrifying hostile energy toward Jinwoo. He felt the thrill of the pending battle starting from the tips of his toes and spreading up his entire body.

All right.

He was ready.

Graaaaaaaaaah!

As the monsters rushed toward Jinwoo as one, he uttered one word with a smile on his face.

“Arise.”

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